car

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2025
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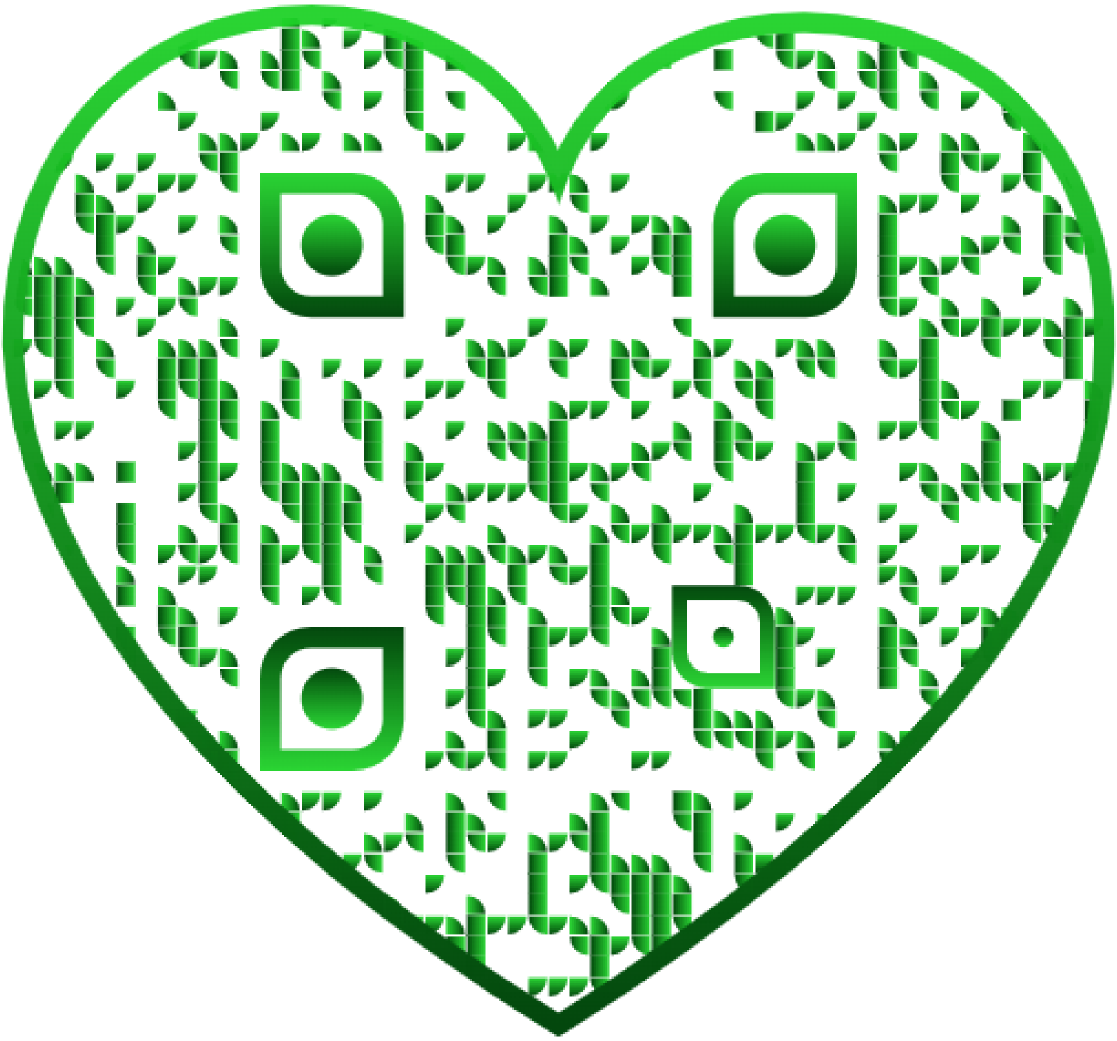
GTI is back

...as an EV. Can Peugeot bring back the 205 magic?

EPIC V12s!

ALL-NEW FERRARI 12CILINDRI, BRUTAL ASTON VANQUISH AND 1001BHP LAMBO REVUELTO FACE OFF



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BEFORE YOU ARRIVE
Model shown is MY25 NX 450h+ Fuel economy: Mpg (l/100km) (weighted combined): 282.4 (1) to 256.8 (1.1). Electric energy consumption (weighted combined): 2.5 to 2.3 miles/kWh. CO_2 emissions (weighted): 22 to 26 g/km. Equivalent all-electric range: 45.9 to 42.5 miles. Plug-in hybrid vehicle requiring mains electricity for charging. Figures obtained using a combination of battery power and fuel and only for comparison purposes. Only compare figures with other similar cars tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon several factors. UK specifications may vary

Welcome

'V12 engines don't make much sense, but so what?'

Better to have loved and lost? Perhaps, but getting into Formula 1 just as the curtain fell on the last of the V12s still hurt, like arriving in Rome just as the Germanic barbarians were preparing their coup de grâce. Clearly, to my young mind at least, more cylinders were better than fewer, particularly when a V12 sounded so good.

But no, apparently not. By the early '90s F1 downsizing – to a mix of V10s and V8s initially – was coming, and it didn't care for history or musicality or the fact that Jean Alesi's V12 Ferrari (piped from the single pathetic speaker of my budget Bush TV) could raise goosebumps on my arms from the other side of the world. V10s and V8s were shorter, smaller and lighter. They also used less fuel, meaning smaller, lighter fuel tanks – and indeed cars. Boo. Honestly, I think it's been all downhill since then.

A couple of years ago I called Derek Warwick, ostensibly to discuss the beautiful 905 Peugeot sports car in which he won Le Mans in 1992. Warwick, more romantic than many F1 and sportscar drivers but still a results-driven individual, loved that Peugeot and its V10 engine in particular. I expected it to come off second best versus the 6.5-litre V12 Jaguar XJR-6 he raced in 1986 (and perhaps the Lamborghini V12-engined Lotus F1 car he drove in 1990) but not a bit of it. Honestly, what's wrong with these people? More is more, Derek!

'I really enjoyed that season with Jaguar. The car was bloody heavy but it had a lot of downforce. The V12 engine, well, it wasn't even an anchor. It was like two anchors bolted together. It was big. And the car was heavy and clumsy. But it was a good car, if not probably quite as good as the [Porsche] 956.' And if he doesn't sound particularly enamoured of that Jaguar V12, don't get him started on the F1 Lotus (though the issues there were as much with Lotus as with Lamborghini).

So, the puny 3.5-litre Peugeot 905 V10 was good was it, Derek? 'The engine was very nice. It sounded amazing. Even at midnight you knew exactly where it was on the circuit because of the noise. It had 750 horsepower and this lovely flat power curve that made it easy to drive quickly without burning your tyres or damaging the gearbox. Good power – I mean, a really strong engine.'

Turns out when you're trying to win races, the on-paper majesty of a dozen cylinders is secondary to things like downforce, power-to-weight ratio and a friendly power curve… Boo again. When our conversation switched to V8s, and specifically Ross Brawn's sensational XJR-14 sportscar, Warwick got even more excited: 'The Peugeot was a sportscar. That V8 Jaguar was a different beast, to be honest. It was a Formula 1 car with clothes on it.'

In 1991, while the XJR-14 was doing its thing, several V12s contested the F1 world championship – big, bespoke works of art from the likes of Honda, Yamaha, Lamborghini and of course Ferrari. By 1994 Ferrari's was the only V12-engined car on the F1 grid. And by 1996 even Ferrari had switched to a V10. Boo a third time.

Fortunately, cars like the Ferrari 12Cilindri, Lamborghini Revuelto and Aston Martin Vanquish – this month's cover stars – are not rational machines, for those who buy them or for those who design and build them. At a time when Ferrari's latest flagship, the V6 F80, has the lowest cylinder count in the bloodline's history, the V12 may not make any sense – but since when did that matter? Smearing paint about on a canvas, firing ourselves to the Moon, falling in love, composing a symphony… they don't make much sense either.

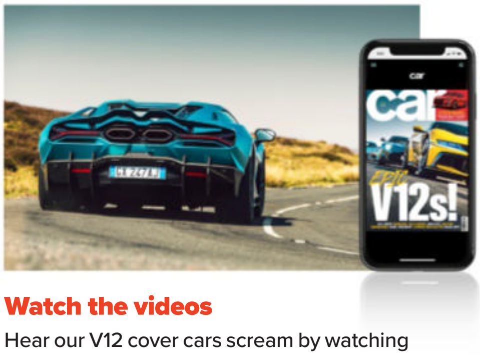
Enjoy the issue.

Ben Miller
Editor

CAR Print+ subscription

Enjoy our back issues

If Peugeot's GTI rebirth has you thinking about retro hatches, find the March 2023 issue via the Archive tab in the *CAR* app.

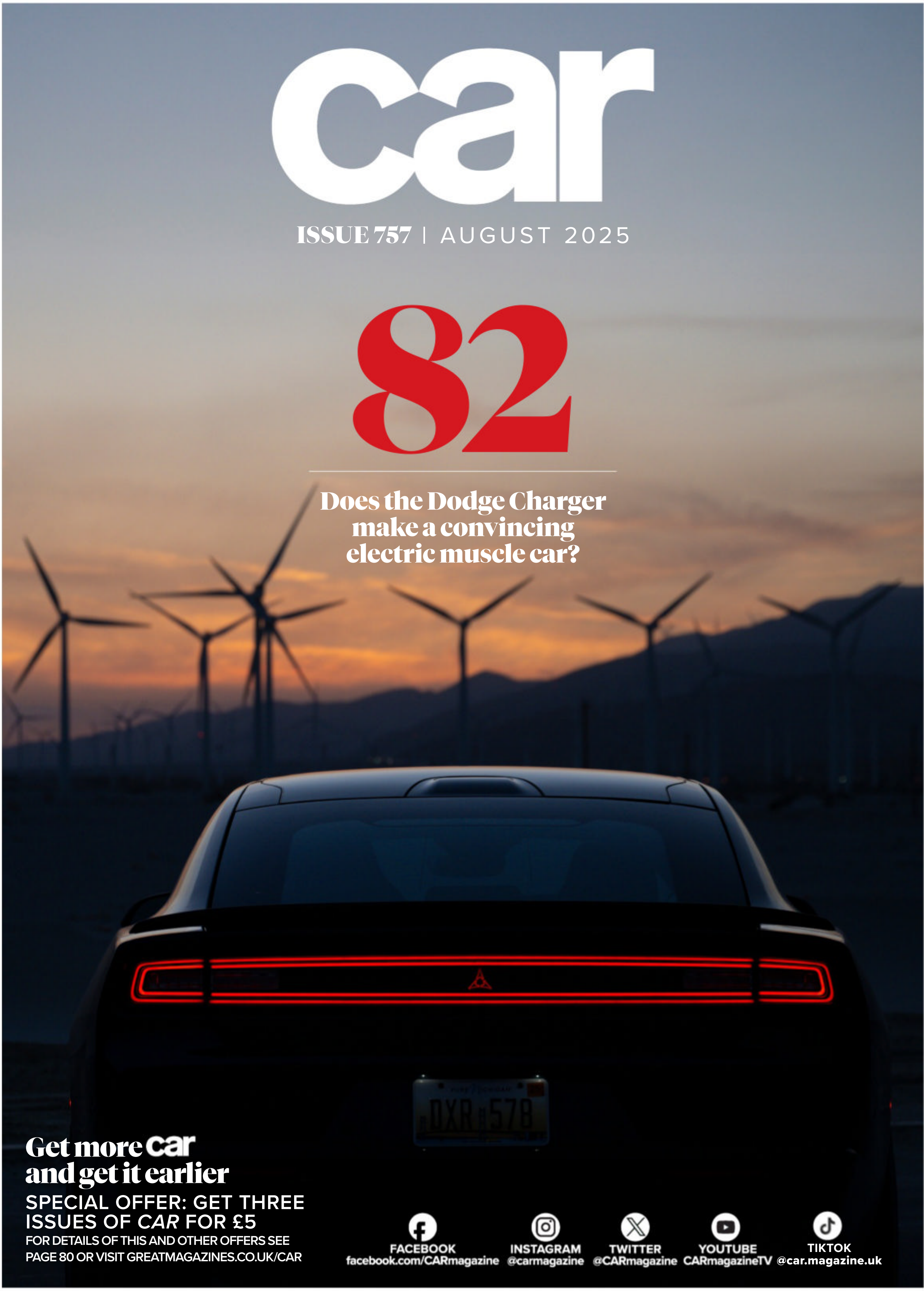


Watch the videos

Hear our V12 cover cars scream by watching the video in the app, or subscribe to *CAR* on YouTube to catch everything we do.

Be first to read our great stories

Ben Oliver – a Peugeot 205 GTI owner, no less – analyses Peugeot's greatest and latest hot hatches in a superb story this month.



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ISSUE 757 | AUGUST 2025

82

Does the Dodge Charger make a convincing electric muscle car?

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Agenda

He's dealing with presidents and central bankers. But he still makes time to know all his products

INTERVIEW

Merc's secret weapon? The boss's mum

Colin Overland Production editor

Used to be in charge of Merc F1 engines; now drives an EV

▶ **There's no faking the glee** in the eyes of Mercedes boss Ola Källenius when he lifts the fabric that's meant to be disguising the interior of the electric GLC he's driving me around Stuttgart in.

'Steve Jobs once said design is not just how it looks – it's how it works. Here's a perfect example: this seat adjuster here is so intuitive. It's a work of art. Aesthetically, even if you know nothing about design, it feels right and it's beautiful to look at. We spent hours and hours and hours and hours on the detail.'

He's right. The controls mounted on the GLC's door, above the opening lever, are clearly derived from those that have been used in several generations of Mercs now, but have acquired an elegant new curviness that makes them look a little Art Deco.

Even more exciting news for some people will be the welcome revelation that two of the most frequently used controls on the steering wheel will be knurled rollers, not fiddly haptic touchsliders.

It is, of course, the CEO's job to big up his cars, but this one's particularly close to his heart. 'They're very nice, and they have to be – my mother is driving one.'

Källenius is one of the most powerful men in the world, but he really doesn't want to disappoint his mum. It's a light-hearted comment, but indicative of his attitude: never lose sight of the customers, and never lose sight of the company's values.

He's been at Mercedes for 32 years and has had the top job for six years. That involves dealing with presidents and chancellors, central bankers and safety commissioners. But he doesn't let that stop him staying close to the cars.

'Even at the top of the company, the board and myself, we spend an enormous amount of time on product development. We drive the cars, we regularly test prototypes, we drive competitors' cars. In a product-driven company, it's about the cars. You MUST be part of that. It would be ridiculous to say that I sign things off, that's not how it works – it's the ultimate team sport and it's the engineers that do the work. But everyone on the board is on a first-name basis with every car that's launched. There's nothing that gets launched and it's a surprise, and I go "Oh, what did they do there?"'

The GLC may be the company's biggest seller, but he's well aware that for significant numbers of people the traditional saloons and estates remain the company's defining vehicles. The electric GLC, set to be unveiled in its finished form at September's Munich show, will be closely followed by an electric C-Class, and a couple of years later an electric E-Class, both running parallel to combustion cars. It all sounds a long way removed from what the world thought was the plan: go full electric by the end of the decade, with the EQ prefix replacing long-cherished badges.

'Where is the market [transition] today compared to where most people believed five years ago? In Europe and North America and some other markets it's definitely slower. In China it's faster for different reasons. For the foreseeable future, maybe the next 10 years, we think the market will be split. If you're faced with that, during that 10 years, maybe more, you have to have a portfolio that caters to both groups. To make that handle-able from an investment point of view and a complexity point of view, you need to have a very strong strategy.'

That includes an increasingly modular approach to component sharing, and greater flexibility in the factories. 'We can build, on the same line, the icon product, the S-Class, and also the EQS – they're both on the same line. We have created that flexibility already and now we're profiting from it.'

He continues: 'We're kind of ready for anything. I don't want to downplay the challenge. It is hard work. I've been with this company 32 years and I've never seen a situation where you have so many moving parts at the same time. And there are a few other things happening in the world, such as trade policies and other details impacting not only our industry but everything that is going on.'

Chauffering *CAR* in the pre-production GLC, he's keen to mention that, like all future Mercs, it will be available with a full-width screen. 'One of my favourite features, ▶

and I have it today in my EQS SUV, is you can you put on that [passenger] side your personalised picture. I have in my car a photo of our summer house in Sweden. It's a happy place, and it makes the car that little bit more personalised.'

Warming to his theme, he emphasises the importance of making Mercs easy to live with: 'We were the first ones to perfect rear-axle steering, with the S-Class and the EQS and so on. I live in Stuttgart in a very narrow street, where I always up until that point had to go back and forth, especially if someone has parked in an awkward position opposite my entrance. I can go in an S-Class and EQS in one go now.'

Safety remains hugely important. 'The ride and drive of a Mercedes needs to feel safe. It's performance, but it's a grown-up performance. It feels safe, you have this fantastic level of comfort, and at the same time the car feels tight. That is Mercedes engineering. We've focused a lot on efficiency in this new generation of e-drivetrain. That whole [CLA EV] drivetrain is now transported into an SUV. Okay, the drag coefficient costs some range, but for an SUV it's very, very good.

'This feeling that if you close your eyes, you know it's a Mercedes – that's from the quality of chassis tuning, the body integrity and the safety. I don't believe there's a car company in the world that comes close to crushing as many cars as Mercedes. And for every crash we do hundreds of thousands of simulations.

The first non-German to run Mercedes is proudly internationalist in his outlook

'You're always looking for efficiencies, the better design, you never stop, we haven't stopped in 139 years. Those core values go back to Gottlieb Daimler and Carl Benz. Those two individuals changed the world.'

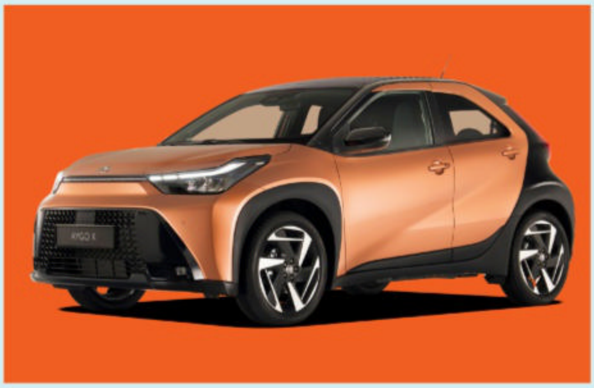
What does he think when he sees a Merc on the road? 'I feel a sense of pride. Working for Mercedes is more than a contract and a pay cheque at the end of the month.'

The Swede is the first non-German to run Mercedes, and is proudly internationalist in his outlook: 'We have a high sense of responsibility as a well established large industrial group, but for many decades now that goes well beyond the borders of this country or this region. We long ago replaced "Made in Germany" with "Made by Mercedes-Benz". If you walk into one of our factories – and in my earlier career I was part of the team building up the SUV factory in Alabama – or walk into Beijing or East London or South Africa, you know it. We run the same standard everywhere. We want to be a good neighbour, not just in Sindelfingen, we want to be a good neighbour in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, everywhere. We integrate into the society in which we operate. You may be a global company but you also have a local profile.'

NEW CARS

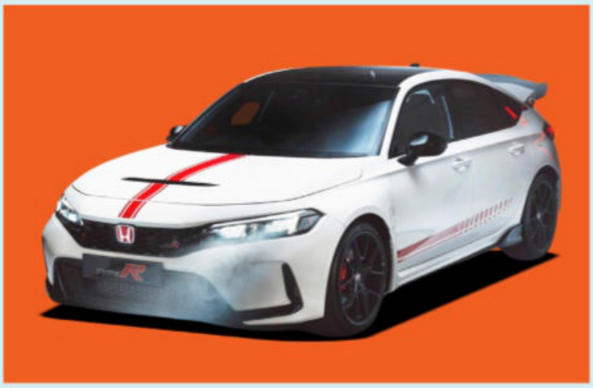
Why the long face?

Jake Groves News editor



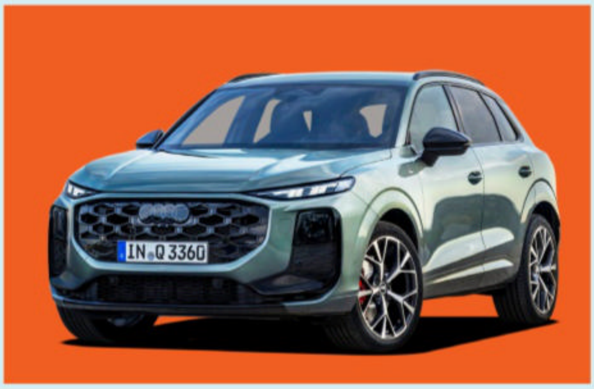
Grumpy and small

▶ **There's much to be happy** about with the updated Toyota Aygo, making it rather odd that it looks so put out. The weedy non-electrified petrol engine is gone, replaced by a hybrid powertrain – an operation that must have involved very deft use of both crowbar and shoe horn, given how dinky the Aygo is. As well as the frowny face, the visual update includes new wheels and the introduction of a GR Sport trim line for those dreaming rally dreams. The interior is now free from animal products, and some trim components have had colour injected into them at the mould stage to reduce paint use.



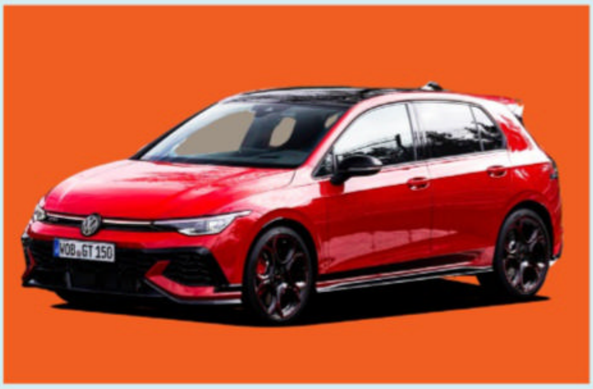
Tired and leaving

▶ **Time to say goodbye to** the Civic Type R in Europe. The FL5 generation, one of the best hot hatches ever, has had its life cut short by Honda's concerns over the Type R's detrimental effect on the line-up's overall emissions. Still, Honda's not allowing the Type R to go quietly, introducing a super exclusive Ultimate Edition that will be sold to only 40 people in the entire continent. The chassis and powertrain are unchanged. Instead, the Ultimate Edition focuses on visuals: some red striping, carbonfibre details and a gift box with a unique keyring, floor mats and a plaque in every one.



Scowling and overcomplicated

▶ **Joining a long line of** angry-looking Audis, meet the third-generation Q3. It takes much of its inspiration from the Q6 e-Tron, with customisable LED lights and a big grille to suck up Mercedes GLAs. Engines include a plug-in hybrid that claims up to 74 miles of electric-only driving. Inside, more Q6 e-Tron touches: lots of gloss black plastic, massive screens and haptic buttons. And Audi has reinvented the indicator stalk; the 'steering wheel control unit' merges the indicator and wiper stalks together and looks like something you'd find on a Keurig coffee machine. Easy to use? We'd bet on 'no'.



Squinting and sprinting

▶ **VW's got its game face** on with the new Golf GTI Edition 50, celebrating half a century of the class-defining hot hatch. It's already become the quickest VW around the Nürburgring, with VW test driver Benny Leuchter clocking a 7min 46.13sec lap; it comes with a Special drive mode mapped to handle the 'Ring's bumps, if you fancy your chances. With 321bhp, the Edition 50 is also the most powerful production GTI ever, and an optional performance pack offers Bridgestone Potenza Race semi-slick tyres and bespoke forged wheels. Classic GTI details remain, including tartan seats and red wheel accents.

NEW CARS

This just in from a galaxy far, far away

Jake Groves News editor

The most powerful AMG ever… for now

AFFALTERBACH
AMG

Town's apple tree crest meets AMG's valve and cam lobe, quaintly

▶ **Mercedes-AMG went to extremes** to prove it really is possible to put a Formula 1 car on the road, although seeing the AMG One project through to completion involved so much effort and so many revised deadlines that the main point it proved was how difficult such an ambition was to achieve.

But now here's a new AMG that claims power and performance potential so vast as to make the low, light two-seater with a hybrid V6 engine seem a little puny by comparison. The debutant is the Concept GT XX, a four-door electric coupe designed to showcase AMG's ability to transition its skills from combustion engines to high-performance EVs. It's claimed to make more than one megawatt from its three axial flux motors, with a top speed of 224mph.

An EV that's the quickest AMG ever? It's quite a statement from the operation that began as an independent engineering firm making brash versions of Merc saloons, exemplified by the Red Pig, a 300 SEL limo that AMG turned into a racer, powered by a 6.8-litre V8, that came second at the Spa 24-hour race in 1971. Fully owned by Mercedes since 2005, AMG is no stranger to electric cars, such as the SLS Electric Drive from more than a decade ago. While it was a limited-run project, it showed there could be such a thing as an electric sports car. And more recently AMG has puts its name to hot versions of the EQE and EQS, even if those are more like luxury EVs with a bit of extra poke rather than serious full-on AMGs.

The GT XX is different in so many ways. This is a bespoke AMG product, designed and developed at AMG's Affalterbach HQ. It's labelled as a concept, but it isn't a static design study that'll sit in a museum once the buzz dies down. Those last two letters – XX – highlight that it's a rolling technology test bed much like the Mercedes Vision EQ XX that came before it. Stand next to the GT XX and you'll see real windscreen wipers and door mirrors, as well as a VIN. When I ask head of advanced design Stefan Lamm if it moves, he's emphatic: 'At some pace.'

One of the key inspirations for the GT XX is the C111, the series of coupes produced in the 1960s and '70s that ▶

experimented with Wankel and diesel engines. Lamm and the design team make several nods to that orange and black wedge, not least via the Sunset Beam paint.

The front of the GT XX lacks the purity of the C111, but the overall look is striking, and there are some fascinating details. There are aero inserts in each wheel hub, powered by an actuator, that can move in or out to prioritise aerodynamics or brake cooling. Bioluminescent paint is applied to the door sills. See that stripe of white? It's backlit and can glow to show how much charge the battery has.

There are exterior speakers built in to the headlights, able to emit various sounds – including fake engine revving – for the benefit of pedestrians. And, for a bit of retro flavour, a pixelated screen nestled between the afterburner-style tail lights can communicate messages.

The pared-back interior includes contoured carbonfibre seats, finned metallic ornaments that look like heat sinks and a steering wheel a lot like the AMG One's. Mercedes is developing a new fake leather that feels as soft as nappa but much stronger; for the GT XX, the material is made from recycled AMG GT3 racing car tyres.

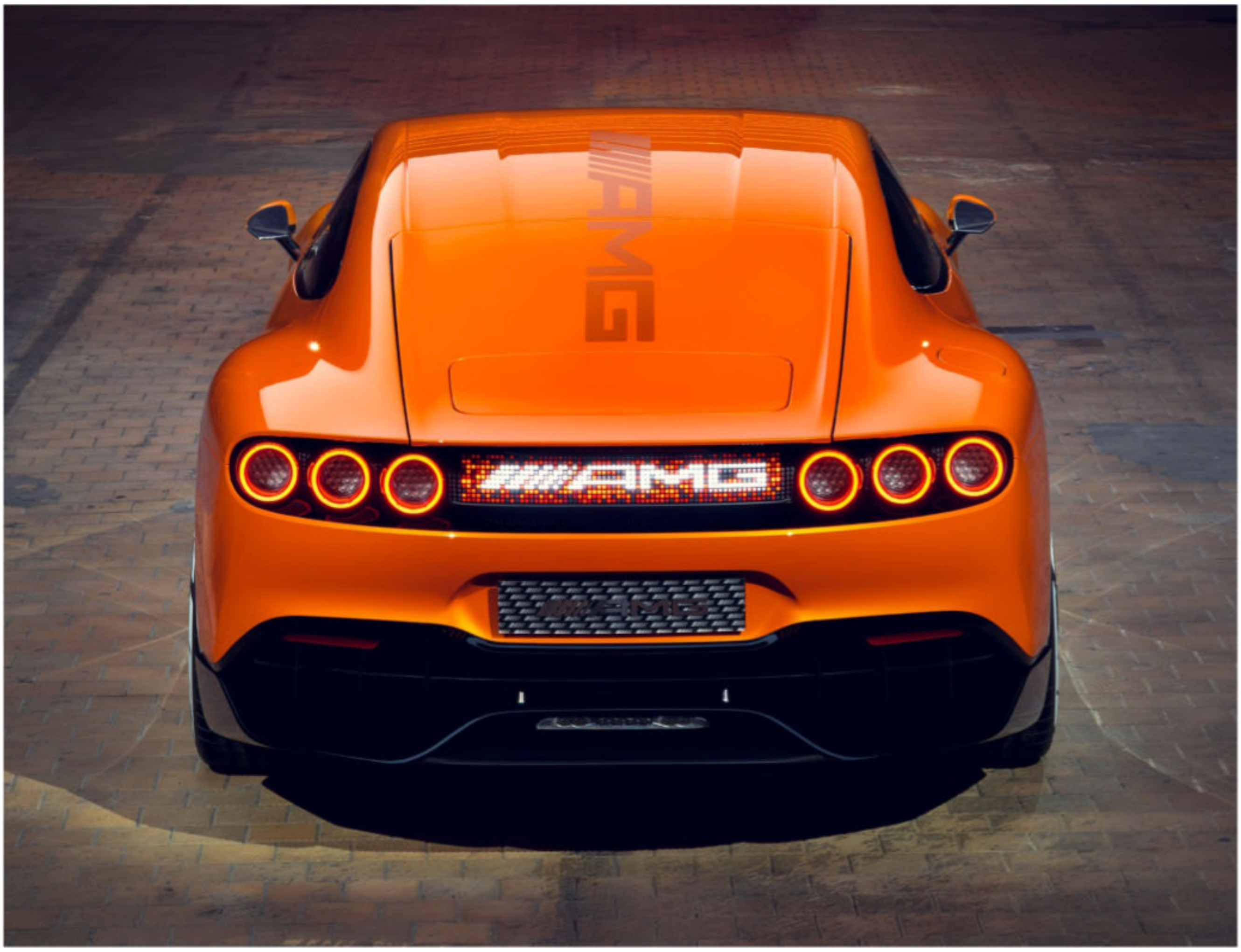
Unlike the EQ XX, which was primarily designed to chase extreme efficiency and manage more than 1000 kilometres on a single charge, the GT XX is chasing extreme power. AMG has achieved the output of one megawatt, or 1341bhp, via axial flux motors from YASA – a British engineering firm owned by Mercedes, as featured in Agenda in the February issue. This is technology – which we dubbed the V12 of electric motors – worthy of the futuristic appearance of the concept. AMG engineers say the powertrain is actually capable of producing more than one megawatt.

Unlike the EQ XX, designed to chase extreme efficiency, this chases extreme power

Quick recap: in a more conventional radial flux electric motor, the magnetic flux flows from the core of the motor outwards and around the edges to spin the rotor. With an axial flux motor, the force flows through the core from magnet to magnet to produce the same effect. This change in flux direction allows the motors to be lighter and less bulky; AMG engineers tell us the GT XX's motors are two thirds lighter and take up a third of the space.

'But the real benefits we get are from the performance,' says David Storr, electric drive component engineer for Mercedes-AMG. 'We've got three times the power density and two times the torque density compared to a conventional electric motor, and we're the first to bring these motors into a full electric vehicle.'

The GT XX has one motor at the front and two at the rear, allowing for all-wheel drive. The rear motors are packaged together into what AMG calls a High Perfor-



mance Electric Drive Unit, which also houses a planetary gearset and inverter. The front motor only kicks in when extra power is required, then disconnects again.

The battery tech is extreme, too. AMG is using cylindrical rather than pouch cells as they are easier to cool and more can be packaged within a battery of the same size, making the pack more energy-dense, although it's a more expensive configuration. The GT XX has 800-volt architecture, and AMG claims it's capable of very high charging speeds. Bertram Tschamon, head of high-performance batteries, tells us the GT XX could charge at an average of 850kW, and says Mercedes had to create a new charging station capable of such extremes.

'The battery can peak even higher than that, but we're not interested in the peak number – we're more interested in what it can do over a long period of time,' says Tschamon. 'With these speeds, you can achieve 400 kilometres [248 miles] in five minutes.' Tschamon also confirms that this is an AMG-specific battery pack, off limits to regular Mercs.

That charging time is purely notional without that super-capable charger, unlikely to be available to the public any time soon. Some of the more futuristic details like those wheel inserts and the bioluminescent paint are experimental, too; AMG exterior tech expert Üsame Akkoca says they're currently at the 'pre-development' stage.

The super-efficient EQ XX concept has not led to a production version, although learnings from the project helped in the creation of the new CLA. Similarly there will be no production version of the GT XX, although some elements of the design will turn up in the next-generation AMG GT 4-Door. More significantly, the GT XX's electric motor and battery technology is ready to go and will be used under the skin of the GT 4-Door. An SUV has been confirmed for 2027, while *CAR*'s intel suggests a two-door coupe and convertible will also be coming.

'The engine has always been the heart of AMG from the Red Pig to the AMG One,' says Storr. 'It's always been the central component of everything we make, and that should be the same in an electric world.'

Pixels on rear panel can spell out messages

IN-CAR TECH

Score one for Apple’s Trojan horse

Curtis Moldrich Digital editor

▶ **Apple may have parked its** on-off ambition to become a car maker, but it’s now engaged in a project with the potential to make its software a significant part of every car. This Trojan horse, enveloping the critical space between car and customer, is called CarPlay Ultra. It’s a logical update to Apple’s existing CarPlay software, and a seismic move in the ongoing game of chess between car makers and big tech.

More powerful and more encompassing than the regular CarPlay, Ultra embeds itself in every aspect of the car, from vehicle dynamics and climate control to the radio and cockpit dials. The result is a system that means the driver rarely needs to dip into the car’s own systems. Aston Martin is the first to offer it, but other car makers will follow.

Ultra requires an Apple iPhone 13 or newer, running at least iOS 18.5. Aston buyers without an iPhone can still use Android Auto or Aston’s own infotainment software, which has just been upgraded. Ultra isn’t the same as Polestar’s use of Google HMI, which exists as the car’s sole operating system.

To use, Ultra is a mix of Apple and Aston, with software that feels very Cupertino surrounded by switchgear that remains very Gaydon.

It’s the first time a car company has surrendered both the infotainment and cockpit dials to Apple, for better or worse. It’s not an approach that every car maker will take – Mercedes, for instance, continues to wage war on the smartphone. But some others are happy to accept that their customers are at ease with their phones, and don’t want to have to mentally adjust to a different interface when they get in their car.

Aston’s view is that it’s about prioritising the customer, as the idea of luxury includes ease of use as much as exclusivity. In any case, the version of Ultra that’s been tailored for Aston will be different from the versions resulting from other collaborations.

If the arrival of Ultra is hugely significant for the car industry, it’s remarkably undramatic for the user. Most of the icons are carried over from the basic non-Ultra version of CarPlay, and it’s only on closer inspection that you’ll see a few subtle additions.

Everything works as you might expect, with very little fuss – and Siri works across the whole thing like a relatively accurate puppet master. It works 1:1 with the switchgear in the cabin too; change the volume or climate control via a physical control, and it’ll be shown in CarPlay Ultra. It’s a technological stepchange but subtle in practice, removing barriers and obstacles that shouldn’t really have existed in the first place.

On the rare occasion you must switch back to the car’s native interface (when changing ambient lightning, for example) it feels terrible. Like the best technology, then, CarPlay Ultra is groundbreaking for around five minutes before melting into everyday use.

Trojan horse or a brilliant first-mover advantage for Aston Martin? We’ll find out in time.

5G
23.0
Phone
Music
Maps
Mes
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Finally, Fiat knows exactly what it's for

Ben Whitworth Contributing editor

▶ **You know those cute and** practical small cars that Fiat has been brilliant at over the decades? After a lot of attempts to break out of that part of the market, Fiat has realised that it's best just sticking to what it's so good at.

'When you think about Fiat, you have the Panda world and the 500 world. When customers walk into our showrooms you have two very different kinds of cars. You are either a 500 lover and you don't even look at the Panda – "Forget it, it's not for me!" – and the other way around. If you are a Panda lover you don't even look at the 500 cars,' says Gaetano Thorel, head of Fiat and Abarth in Europe.

Fiat has high hopes for the Grande Panda, now available with engines as well as the EV version that arrived earlier in the year.

'The urban environment is the perfect territory for electric cars. I mean driving an electric car in London or Milan – it's a no-brainer, right?' says Thorel. 'Range and charging are not issues in the city. So electric cars should be city cars. But then you look at the electric car sectors, and it's the opposite: if you look at how the electric industry in Europe is divided, cars in the A and B sectors are the huge minority, and most of the electric cars are in the premium C and D sectors. That is pretty strange, no? Electric models have been a success in Europe for Fiat, with the 500e and now the Grande Panda electric, which will be around 20 per cent of Grande Panda sales. The electric city car will develop, but for us it's a must because it's our territory. Fiat exists for urban mobility and light commercial vehicles.'

It's no secret that a lot of the componentry is shared across the Stellantis group – so how does Fiat ensure its cars retain their Fiat spirit, and won't be mistaken for Vauxhalls or Citroëns?

'The job when we developed Grande Panda was to be very rigid on the DNA of the brand,' says Thorel. 'And if maintaining this DNA requires modifications then we modify to keep the Fiat character. This is the opportunity. If you are very good at developing a car that's rooted in your DNA that is what will make the difference to the customer. A Fiat must be a Fiat. If you just have a copycat approach to everything then you have a problem.'

Part of knowing what Fiat is and isn't involves knowing where the Abarth sub-brand fits in. In the case of the Grande Panda, it doesn't, or at least not yet.

'Abarth is the black sheep of the family,' says Thorel's colleague Guillaume Clerc, head of product for Fiat and Abarth. 'It's always more than a little off the beaten track. There will not always be an Abarth version of every Fiat. With the 500 and 600 we knew from the start we would have Abarth versions. But nothing is currently planned for the Grande Panda. Performance is what counts in the end – we always want to create a car that gives customers the Abarth thrill and excitement.

'The Grande Panda will be built in the Kragujevac plant in Serbia, keeping it at full capacity for years. Only when there would be the capacity and the technology to deliver the performance would we consider it.'

Fiat's Euro boss Gaetano Thorel: focused on urban mobility

Daniel Pullen

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Model shown Abarth 600e Scorpionissima

Fuel economy and CO_2 results for the Abarth 600e Scorpionissima 207kW (280PS). Mpg (l/100km): N/A. CO_2 emissions: 0g/km. Electric range up to 207 miles (WLTP).

The range and electric consumption figures mentioned comply with the WLTP test procedure, on the basis of which new vehicles are type approved from 1 September 2018. They may vary depending on actual conditions of use and on different factors such as: vehicle load, accessories fitted (post registration), speed, thermal comfort on board the vehicle, driving style and outside temperature. The charging time depends in particular on the power of the charger on board. Visit your local Abarth Retailer for further information.

DEFEND
COBRA
DEFEN

Peterhansel: some like it very, very hot

MOTORSPORT

Welcome home, Land Rover

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **It's like Land Rover has** always been there, the ghost at the Dakar banquet for 40-odd years. The very first event, in 1979, was won by a Range Rover. But in fact 2026 will be the first full factory entry into the desert race. And this is no gentle toe in the water: it's a very serious attempt to show what a lightly modified Defender can do in the world's toughest race.

And never mind the risk – always present at the Dakar – of it all going horribly wrong, with the disaster replayed again and again on a million social media feeds.

But if it all goes right? That will be JLR's way of reiterating what it's always maintained: that however luxurious and technologically sophisticated the Defender has become, it's still the real off-road deal.

The Defender will be competing in the Stock class, but

At the Dakar there's a risk of it all going horribly wrong, with the disaster replayed again and again on a million social media feeds

the people involved in the Defender Dakar project aren't merely eyeing success within the class – they want to bloody a few noses among the big guns competing in the Ultimate category – where Ford, Toyota, Dacia and others compete for overall honours in cars that don't have a very close relationship with any roadgoing production model.

By contrast, the Defender that's being prepared for the Dakar and the rest of the World Rally Raid Championship is essentially a Defender 110 with the twin-turbo V8 engine from the Octa slotted in.

Testing has begun, with lead driver Stéphane Peterhansel pounding the car in the dunes of Morocco. He's competed in the Dakar 35 times, winning it on 14 occasions: eight in cars, six on motorcycles. He's joined by rising talents Rokas Baciuska and Sara Price, who have both won Dakar stages in lesser categories.

Peterhansel told *CAR*: 'I'm really excited about the idea, doing it in a different way, with a brand with so much history in off-road. I'm really happy to be back with the roots of the Dakar. You remember when Dakar started, 45 years ago, everybody used production cars. I like the smell of petrol, I like the noise of the racing engine.'

JLR Motorsport boss James Barclay – who will soon be running McLaren's WEC Hypercar operation – told us: 'He's taken part in developing cars for so many teams in the Dakar, he's a real asset to us. Rokas and Sarah are both keen to learn from him.

'Stefan wasn't competing in the Dakar this year, but instead he rode his motorbike to the real [city of] Dakar, which tells you the kind of guy he is, a true adventurer.'

Why join in now? And why the Dakar?

'With new Defender, it really does stand for capability, durability. If you're going to do anything in motorsport with Defender there's really only one thing, it's the Dakar: the Everest of the off-road world. It's the kind of challenge we love, and a great opportunity to bring this incredible SUV together with the most iconic off-road event.'

The evolution of the Stock category was key to JLR deciding to join in. 'The issue with Ultimate, although it's a fantastic category, it's not the origin of Dakar, with production-based cars. The whole point is showing what the adventure-ready Defender is capable of. To then take a prototype spaceframe-based car that has no relevance to Defender we didn't think was authentic.

'We worked with the [event organisers] ASO and the FIA, and with other manufacturers – in time they will confirm – to create a set of regulations that allow the car to breathe. There's a few modifications, but fundamentally it's the same bodyshell, it's the same transmission, the same engine. You're allowed to make suspension modifications, a tiny amount of wheelbase movement, bigger wheels and tyres, you can change slightly the approach angles, and that's pretty much it.

'We think the category has the potential, over the course of a whole Dakar, to not be far off the top 20 overall, right in there with some of the Ultimates.

'It's something you can relate to. A bit like the best of production-based racing: Super Touring cars in the '90s, World Rally in the '90s, it has a feeling about it like that. It's relevant to the car you have on the road or would like to have on the road. The race car has some elements of Octa and some elements of 110 Defender. Ultimately the car will feel different, except for the powertrain – it's the same twin-turbo V8, albeit with less power because of the Dakar regulations.'

Peterhansel adds: 'But the torque is similar or a little bit more. When I drove in Morocco, the torque made it super easy to drive in the dunes.'

So much for the car. But how, at the age of 59, does Peterhansel stay so fit and so competitive in an event that lasts two weeks and covers thousands of miles in the unforgiving Saudi Arabian desert?

'I used to do a lot of endurance sport – running and cycling. But now running has started to be difficult because of my knees, problems resulting from motorcycle injuries, so I do a lot a bicycle riding. But the main challenge is not physical, it's mental. You need to keep your concentration for hours and hours, and for that you need to do activities where you use your concentration. I never spend time in the gym. I need action.'

Finished livery will be revealed ahead of race debut

Another good Nissan... for other people to buy

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **When did you last see** someone wearing a Nissan T-shirt? A brand that doesn't inspire much of an emotional attachment, its biggest successes have been with function-over-fun vehicles such as the Qashqai and Juke, and the pioneering electric Leaf, which has sold 700,000 worldwide in 15 years.

But the newly revealed Mk3 Leaf arrives in a very different world. Whereas 2010's Mk1 had next to no competition in the mainstream market, the new Sunderland-built Mk3 is up against a dizzying array of rival EVs. Which is why we're quizzing Nissan Design Europe vice president Giovanny Arroba about T-shirts as an indicator of the level of passion for the brand and its heritage, without which it may struggle to win hearts as well as minds.

'We did a lot of soul searching: what is Nissan? It's not just performance. We're also adventure, we're also charm, and balance. We tend to pioneer these cars that have a lot of character, and they become almost a brand themselves – Qashqai, Juke, GT-R, Z is a brand all to itself. People wear a Z T-shirt, they wear a GT-R T-shirt. But how do we make Nissan cool? What is the DNA? Hopefully you'll see that reflected in cars like this and the Micra.'

He's very pleased with the new motif, representing a two (Ni in Japanese) and a three (San). It started with the rear lights of the new Leaf, which have an eye-catching combination of two horizontal lines and three vertical, but it also appears on the charger flap and elsewhere.

'It's very easy to do a horizontal light bar, but we wanted to do something more memorable, to make the brand more appealing, more lifestyle-oriented, not just a commodity for mobility, but a desirable Japanese-themed design product. Say something new – but at the same time be accessible and approachable.'

The new car sits on a version of the CMF-EV platform used in the Ariya. It's 14cm shorter than the previous Leaf, and it's slightly taller and wider. With clever packaging – thanks to a more compact e-motor and relocated heater unit – boot and cabin space are bigger than before, and it's more aerodynamically slick.

It will be available with a choice of battery sizes, 52 and 75kWh, the larger one giving up to 375 miles of range and efficiency of 4.4 miles per kWh. With charging capability up to 150kW – and what Nissan claims is a near-flat charging curve – it can gain up to 260 miles in 30 minutes.

Nissan has changed the world at least twice – once with the original Leaf, and four years before that with the decision to stop making dull cars like the Primera and Almera and instead focus on crossovers.

Nissan's hard-won reputation for reliability and value keeps the Qashqai selling, despite the fact that it no longer stands out, as its look has been so widely adopted. Will that work for the Leaf too? Its Ariya-alike nose does it few favours, but the sides have a clean elegance about them, and the coupe-ish rear is evocative of '80s/'90s Nissans such as the 100 NX, 200 SX and 300 ZX. Quite a leap to think of nostalgia for those cars converting into Leaf sales, but stranger things have happened.

NISSAN
LEAF

New-look Mk3 will soon be one of five Nissan EVs

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5
32,500 KGS.
71,650 LBS.
3,700 KGS.
8,160 LBS.
28,800 KGS.
63,490 LBS.
76.4 CU.M.
2,700 CU.FT.

Accountants love 'one car for all'; buyers aren't so sure

GLOBAL TRENDS

Has the world given up on the world car?

Angus MacKenzie Global industry commentator

▶ **Europeans buy Mercedes-Benzes** made in America and Fords from Thailand. Americans drive Buicks built in China and Dodges manufactured in Italy. Most BMW 3-series models sold in Australia are assembled in South Africa. That great British off-road icon, the Land Rover Defender, is produced in Slovakia. With its scattered factories and sprawling supply chains, the automotive industry has long been the poster child for globalisation.

But the buzzword echoing in boardrooms these days is localisation. Where once executives dreamed of giant global enterprises that took components from anywhere and turned them into products shipped everywhere, they are now talking about shortening supply lines, reducing exposure to geopolitical pressures, and better meeting customer expectations in key markets.

In 1981 the Escort was the world's best-selling car, with annual sales in the US topping 400,000 vehicles. But it was not a world car

'The automotive industry… increasingly looks like a regional business,' said Ford boss Jim Farley in the aftermath of President Trump's decision to impose swingeing tariffs on vehicles and automotive components imported into the US from China and Europe.

Whether it's for business or taste reasons, localising is not a new idea. Ford specifically designed its Model Y for Europe in the 1930s because the Model A was too expensive for the locals. Toyota has built full-size pick-up trucks specifically designed and engineered for the North American market in Texas since 2002.

The size of the Chinese market has prompted some Western manufacturers to tailor some cars specifically to local tastes. Audi has some new China-only models, and VW is changing its whole approach to developing vehicles for China. 'Typically, we developed a global platform in Wolfsburg and localised it in China, but this model doesn't work any more,' says VW Group chief operating officer Arno Antlitz. 'Customers demand different cars, different technology and different features. Also, from the cost side it didn't work. We have embarked on a strategy of local vehicles for local customers.'

Does regionalisation and localisation mean the death of what was once regarded as the ultimate expression of a globalised automotive industry, the world car? That depends on how you define a world car.

Ford has spent a lot of time and money trying to figure out the world car. Project Erika was a front-wheel-drive compact car jointly developed in the late 1970s by Ford's North American and European operations. It was manufactured in Ford plants in the US, the UK, Germany, Portugal and Brazil, its components sourced from 17 countries. Europeans and Americans knew Erika as the Escort. In 1981 it was the world's best-selling car, with annual sales in the US topping 400,000 vehicles in the mid '80s. But it was not a world car. While the European and American versions of the Escort looked almost identical, they shared only a handful of common parts and not a single body panel was interchangeable.

Alan Mulally, who took over troubled Ford as CEO in 2006, turned the world car idea into an entire corporate strategy. His One Ford aimed to consolidate design, engineering and manufacturing operations in the Americas, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region so the company could more efficiently produce standardised and globalised mainstream cars and commercial vehicles.

For several years the Mondeo delivered on the One Ford dream. One Ford also gave Europe the Mustang and America the Fiesta. But it did not give Ford a repeatable blueprint for creating a world car, and over the last 20 years the vision has become increasingly clouded, and Ford's products far from universal.

The company actually had much more success with making one car for the whole world back in the early days. The car that made Ford a big deal, the Model T, was a world car. In 1911, barely three years after the first Model Ts began appearing on American roads, it was also being built in Manchester. In 1925 alone, Ford exported more than 303,000 Model Ts to countries all over the world. VW's original Beetle was another world car, with 21.5 million sold around the globe over a 65-year period.

What made both the Model T and the Beetle world cars was that they were durable, affordable and worked pretty much anywhere. The mobility they provided was what consumers desired, not the cars themselves.

Today's automotive desires are more nuanced, more self-indulgent, more focused on the product rather than the destination. Consumers don't want a vehicle to simply get them somewhere; they want it to express something about themselves, to make their lives easier and more comfortable while doing so.

But they don't want to pay over the odds. Recently reinstated Volvo boss Håkan Samuelsson has a shrewd perspective on the rise of localised tastes at a time when production costs have to be reined in. His company's best seller, the XC60, is made in both China and Sweden. 'We have seen this trend going on for a long time,' Samuelsson says. 'We need to produce closer to our customers to be more agile and faster in delivery times. We need to listen to those customers and adapt to local preferences.'

Beetle was so much more than just a German car

First drives

THE WORLD'S BEST WRITERS IN THE NEW CARS THAT MATTER

The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

THE 300-MILE TEST

Mountain dubious

More performance, same luxury – can the revised Bentley Bentayga Speed deliver it all? We're almost convinced

Words Piers Ward

Montanan bridges happy to handle a 2466kg SUV

BENTLEY
PURE MICHIGAN
098M181
FEB MANUFACTURER

Up ahead in this vast valley in the middle of Montana, a gopher pops its head out of the grass verge, looking left and right like it's been intently studying the Green Cross Code. The Bentley Bentayga Speed has been running hard but a quick lift breaks the relentless speed, giving the gopher a chance to risk it as he/she (it's difficult to tell) charges across the tarmac, tail pinned tall, and tumbles headlong into the safety of the grass on the other side of the road.

It's a lucky escape for our furry friend, as this latest Bentayga Speed is the fastest yet and – at 2466kg and riding on 23-inch wheels – not gopher-friendly.

Now into its second iteration thanks to 2020's facelift, the Speed completes the Bentayga range before the electric 'luxury urban SUV' arrives next year. There's the Extended Wheelbase (with vast rear legroom), the V6 hybrid, the core Bentayga and now the Speed.

This time around, the Speed ditches the W12 and runs the same 4.0-litre twin-turbo V8 as the base Bentayga, but with even more power – 15bhp more than the last Speed and 99bhp more than the next most powerful current Bentayga, for a total of 641bhp. Torque is now 627lb ft, again up on the last Speed, and the 0-62mph time has dropped to 3.6 seconds.

It's thanks to the usual tweaks to the engine – more turbo boost (by 0.2 bar), larger fuel injectors and a lower compression ratio. As standard, the car comes with a sports exhaust but a new Akrapovic titanium system is also available. Costing £7740, it saves 12.5kg, which is only 0.5 per cent of the Bentayga's kerbweight. Owners will likely tick that box for the extra noise it brings rather than any handling benefits from the micro-diet.

Visual changes are few and low-key (smoked tail lights, for instance) but they help tighten up the look of the car slightly. Parked next to a Continental GT Azure, with its Harmony Crystal headlight detail glinting in Montana's morning sun, the Bentayga almost looks restrained.

After puttering through Big Sky on a gentle throttle opening, accompanied by a menacing throb from the exhaust, we head south. This is the first time I've been to Montana but thanks to the TV series *Yellowstone* I've brought with me plenty of preconceptions as to what it should be like. Disappointingly, not everyone is wearing a Stetson. But the vastness of the landscape in the TV show is matched by reality, with never-ending valleys cupped by snow-capped mountains, grass still green from the melt of the last winter. Rivers rush across the landscape but the snow-melt water looks anything but inviting.

Natural beauty never far away in Montana

Even if you're not tempted to go skinny dipping, it must be a constant headache trying to wear the right combination of clothes for any given day, with the heat of the summer and the cold of the winter fighting against each other, broken only by a short spring and autumn, and the extra complication brought by altitude. Still, plenty of room for a few changes of outfit in the boot of the Bentayga.

Despite the Bentley's serene progress, you can tell this is an area of the States where humans don't always have the upper hand over nature. The locals seem to embrace this – anglers are dotted along the river, most of them braving it in the grey water with just a pair of waders for comfort. Kayakers splash through the rapids and RV parks litter the roadside, while dusty hiking trails point invitingly into the wilderness. America's obesity problems would be solved instantly if everyone lived like Montanans.

The Bentayga is the luxuriously leather-upholstered antithesis to all this, as it arcs along the valley floor with barely a shrug. Talk about restrained progress – it feels like we've barely touched the sides of the V8 so far.

We peel off the main drag onto a twisty side road and realise at once that now is the time to stretch it. Sport mode engaged, throttle slammed. There's the inevitable pause as all the systems hitch up their skirts and get ready to unleash the vast potential, followed by a tiny rock back as the initial whump of power hits – and then all hell breaks loose. It feels even more dramatic than its 3.6sec 0-62mph time would suggest. It is completely unnecessary, mad and also brilliant, a party trick with more dimensions than any EV, however impressive the figures. ▶

▲
PLUS
Fantastic exhaust note; myriad options; pace; handling stability

▼
MINUS
Ride quality on the 23-inch wheels; cost

Pick-up: 0 miles

Our test car is the new Speed, which looks a lot like the regular Bentayga. Smoked rear lights and subtle 'Speed' badges are the biggest giveaways.

3 miles

Drop it into Sport mode and… wow – that's quite the attitude from the optional Akrapovic exhaust system. Not one for urban areas or quiet getaways.

15 miles

Our altitude touches nearly 2000 metres during our drive but fortunately we don't have to crack open the emergency oxygen provided by the hotel.

Rear spoiler is standard on Speed

Interior also comes in less boudoir finishes

120 miles

There are roughly 28,000 ranches in Montana. This in a state the size of Germany and with a total population of just one million people.

125 miles

Look natural, Piers. Ward blames the way-too-this-century puffer jacket as the *only* reason he didn't get a part as an extra in the *Yellowstone* TV series.

130 miles

Drop into Ennis, previously a gold rush town. The Bentley feels like a vicar in a mosh pit as we pass Ford F-150 pick-up trucks by the dozen.

> **It's remarkably lithe for such a big and heavy car, with an impressive lack of body movement**

I never felt like the W12 was the best Bentley engine once the V8 came along, and the new car puts that argument beyond all doubt. The 12-cylinder could never hope to compete with the character and thrust of this V8, a warbling symphony of brilliance for the most part.

It might seem odd in a car called Speed, but Bentley has dropped the compression ratio. R&D director Markus Thiel explains that 'it allows us to go with higher chamber pressures… so we optimise the process to get more power and torque out of the existing engine'. Although it makes sense from an engineering point of view, it means the engine doesn't really get going until 2300rpm and doesn't have any proper thrust until 2600rpm.

It's not something you immediately notice, but on some subconscious level you're aware that your right foot is having to flex more than the 2mm it's used to in most of Crewe's finest; some of Bentley's usual effortless waftability has been sacrificed.

I ask Thiel why Bentley hasn't used the brilliant plug-in hybrid system that's found in the Continental GT Speed. Wouldn't that fill the torque gap while also giving the benefit of some torque vectoring?

Thiel explains that there would be pros and cons to using a hybrid powertrain for the Speed. He says: 'The PHEV would come with more weight, way more power and, because of the e-motor, even more responsiveness.' The right results have been achieved by other means, he insists.

It still feels like a miss, though, when Bentley should be pushing the Bentayga harder to keep up with more modern rivals. Likely that the re-engineering costs would be hard to justify in a 10-year-old car.

This first bit of the journey reveals one further problem. The Speed is available on your choice of 22- or 23-inch wheels (the latter with three different finishes), and the 285/35 ZR23 rubber on our car doesn't have the give you'd expect. When we hit a series of scars slashed into the tarmac, expanded by Montana's sub-zero winters, the wheels thump through them with a whack. It sends a judder into the cabin and the steering does a little jig in your hands; it's not bad enough to affect body control but it's an annoyance that shouldn't be there.

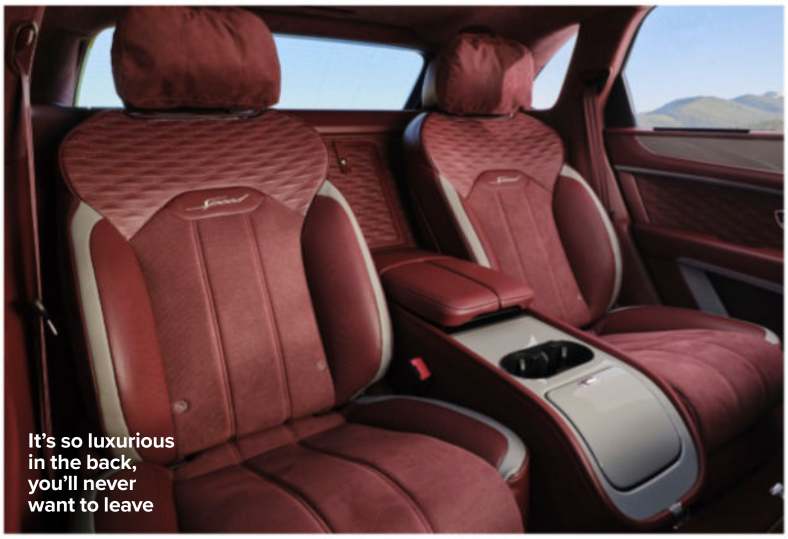
We drop back out of Sport mode, which has 15 per cent stiffer dampers, and into Bentley mode (still too much reaction) and then into Comfort, where the car is closer to a Bentley of old, serene and calm. I later have a ride in the back of a Bentayga, and Comfort mode seems entirely appropriate from that perspective. It's impressive that any SUV can stretch its abilities this wide – from quiet limo to bellowing thunder god – but those 23-inch wheels bring it a bit too far away from luxury, in my opinion.

Time to get back in the driver's seat and explore its sporting potential some more. The road narrows and also starts to bend appealingly, threading its way up a hillside and giving us a chance to test the handling. Back into Sport again – that engine note will never get boring – and the car hunkers down, ready to tackle the first right.

It's remarkably lithe for such a big and heavy car, turning in with an initial hint of understeer as the weight transfers before the chassis and tyres bite to give you confidence to lean more on the steering. Its lack of body movement is impressive, with a good balance between roll and tautness. The Bentayga uses brake vectoring to trim the nose and you can feel it working to keep the car in shape as the speed climbs, not aggressively but with just enough adjustment that it adds to the sense of confidence.

Head into the next corner hard and then lift before getting on the brakes and WHAT WAS THAT? The exhaust goes off like one of *Yellowstone's* rifles, with the sort of over-run bang that wouldn't feel out of place at a hot-rod convention. None of the exhaust noise is synthesised – everything you hear is real – but the whizzbangs wouldn't be the done thing outside the vicarage.

Tarmac stops, gravel starts. Bentley has made sure we're aware there's a new level of dynamic slip programmed when you select ESC Dynamic in Sport, and this seems ▶



It's so luxurious in the back, you'll never want to leave

131 miles

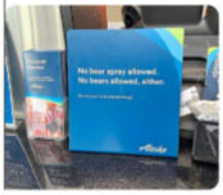
Welcome
TO
ENNIS
POP. 840 PEOPLE
11,000,000 TROUT

Welcome to the outdoors. Ennis's town sign illustrates just how few people live out here and how much they're outnumbered by the local wildlife.

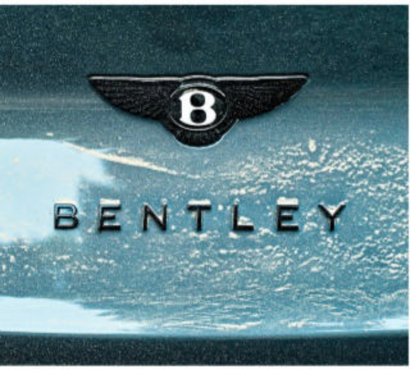
195 miles

Agricultural wits label the green tractors as 'John Dear' because they're so expensive. Not as pricey as a Bentayga Speed, though.

294 miles



Back at the airport in Bozeman and greeted by reminders that security checks and bear spray do not make happy bedfellows.



like a good time to try it, when the speeds will be lower and there's less chance of ploughing a new furrow in one of Montana's ranches.

It's around now that you remember why you splashed out a considerable sum of money on the upgraded brakes. The Speed is available with your choice of iron or ceramic brakes, but you need the latter if you want to get the Dynamic specification, which gives you ESC Dynamic. You can order the ceramic brakes regardless of whether you're on 22- or 23-inch wheels. Ceramics alone will cost you £14,390 but the Dynamic specification, which includes 23-inch wheels *and* ceramic brakes, is £10,370. And yes, my head hurts as well.

The feel you get from the steering on gravel is good but the sense from the chassis and seat is better, giving you a heads-up as the car starts to slip. It's very progressive, with just a gentle nudge at the rear and a slight sense through the seat of your pants, allowing you to trim the steering fractionally to counter it. What's impressive is that it feels natural and not like you're fighting the car.

You can also appreciate the brake vectoring more now, as the slippery surface shows up the nose tuck to a greater degree than on tarmac. It's noticeable how much the brakes bring the car back into line, working with the steering to counter any understeer. I wish they had a bit more feel at the top of the pedal, mind. Brake, turn in, bit more brake to hit the apex, hold the steering, on the power early, rear rotates, wind the steering off slightly, exit.

Then we're back on tarmac, dust trail disappearing into the distance behind us. Ranch gates flash past. The sun continues to beat down, although our altitude stops it getting too hot. The fields stretch off into the distance, empty save for the odd irrigation rig. Cattle and horses are conspicuous by their absence, as thin wire fences line the roadside with minimal livestock to keep at bay.

Massive escarpments rise either side of us until we punch past and climb to a high of nearly 2000 metres. Strange wooden structures lie in the fields next to the road, looking for all the world like avalanche fences in the Alps but with no hill above them to give any gravitational fall to the snow. And then it dawns – they're to stop snow drifts. These things are several metres high: what must the snow be like out here in December?

Sailing past in June's 20° heat, it's weird to think snow starts to fall out here in September. Breadth of weather meet breadth of Bentayga. Bentley sees this Speed as pushing the boundaries of what's possible with the Bentayga, giving it maximum stretch, and it's definitely got a bit more edge. But I worry that it's got away from what makes a Bentayga special. It's still not quite got the dynamic ability of Aston Martin's DBX and now it's lost a bit of the Bentley refinement. You can't blame Bentley for trying – since it effectively launched this sector in 2015 with the first Bentayga, rivals have woken up and joined the feast, giving the British firm the headache of staying ahead. But that's even more reason to play to your strength – the best Bentayga is the base car.

Data

PRICE
£219,000

POWERTRAIN
3996cc 32v twin-turbo V8, eight-speed auto, all-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE
641bhp @ 6000rpm, 627lb ft @ 2250rpm, 3.6sec 0-62mph, 193mph

WEIGHT
2466kg

EFFICIENCY
20mpg (est), 300g/km-plus CO2 (est)

ON SALE
Now

RATING
★★★★☆

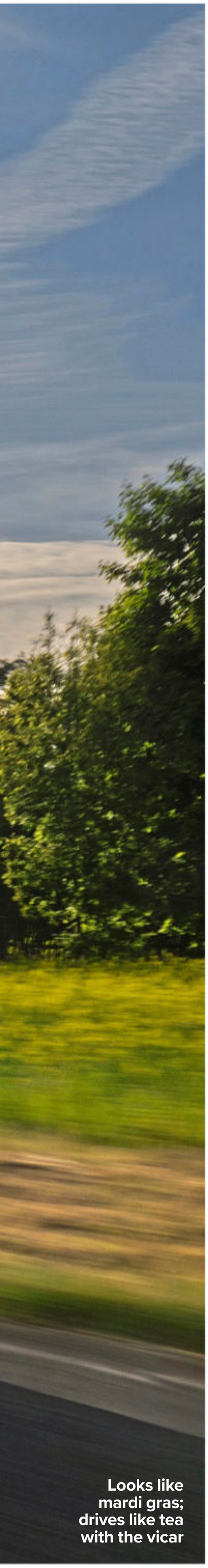
Next month

MERCEDES-BENZ CLA
JUST HOW EFFICIENT CAN IT BE?

Sailing past in June's 20º heat, it's weird to think that snow falls here in September

It's serene even at speed, which is all rather odd for a vRS

SKODA
DA X 2890E



Looks like mardi gras; drives like tea with the vicar

SKODA ELROQ VRS

But where's the fun?

Didn't vRS used to stand for a bit wild and crazy? No longer, it seems

The best bit: do the job and look the part

Even painting the Elroq vRS in Skoda's lurid Hyper Green isn't enough to hide how sensible this hot SUV is. Think of it as a range-topping version and it makes sense, but obsess about the supposed hotness of a vRS and it's a disappointment.

A front-mounted electric motor joins the usual rear motor to take the power to 335bhp and torque to 501lb ft – up 53bhp and 100lb ft compared to the standard Elroq. The 79kWh battery gives a claimed range of 339 miles, not far behind the 365 miles achievable from the most mile-happy Elroq.

Boot the throttle and response is instant and plentiful, with 62mph taking 5.4 seconds. It's achieved without the accompaniment of artificial noise, making the vRS serene even at speed, which is all rather odd, with only a small amount of road noise from the test car's optional 21-inch alloy wheels. The sporty Elroq manages to avoid the harshness of the larger Enyaq vRS, being settled even on the harshest of roads. The standard 20s offer the best comfort, though they come in an all-black finish and can look like they've just been rattle-canned.

The regular Elroq is already a good steer, and the vRS continues with this but never feels a step up. It stays pleasantly flat through corners and the steering gives you enough confidence to push on with confidence. A pity it inherits the vague brakes that are a feature of most cars built on VW's MEB electric car platform, though they're nowhere as bad as those on a Cupra Tavascan. The front electric motor's fairly small contribution means the vRS still has that inherent rear bias, which you feel when really pressing on – and especially with the DSC turned to Sport. Good to drive, yes. But fun to drive? Not hugely.

But more positive is that, in true vRS style, this hotter vRS will be just as easy to live with as the standard Elroq. Practicality remains highly impressive, with rear seat and boot space unchanged. Adults can sit in the rear with plenty of room to spare, and the 470-litre boot is more practical than that figure suggests thanks to various compartments and dividers. And there's a net on the underside of the parcel shelf for storing charging cables. Why this isn't the universal way of keeping these out of the way yet still handy is beyond me.

The interior gets some smart lime green contrast stitching and microsuede to set it apart from a regular Elroq, but the exterior is rather tame. You won't even find a vRS badge on the rear end. It's a rare instance where I wish the sporty version of a car was more try-hard.

Prices for the vRS start from £46,560 – around £5000 more than the Sportline 85 version, though you get plenty extra, such as a head-up display, Canton sound system and electric and massaging front seats. A 13-inch touchscreen is standard and there's a useful amount of physical switchgear.

If you want an Elroq with all the bells and whistles, I can see the appeal of this version, and it makes a lot more sense than the £5000 more expensive Enyaq vRS, but you should look elsewhere for sportiness.

TED WELFORD

First verdict

Fundamentally an excellent electric family SUV, but one that doesn't need or warrant a vRS badge

★★★☆☆

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Yikes, Hyper Green is bold!

5 minutes
Microsuede seats are nice. The driver even gets a massage

20 minutes
Pretty quick off the line, but I think I'd like some kind of 'sport' sound

35 minutes
Another electric VW Group product with spongy brakes

45 minutes
In a tight, greasy corner you can still feel the rear-wheel-drive bias

PLUS

Impressively spacious; generously equipped; refined and comfortable

MINUS

Doesn't feel like a step up to drive; vRS design is way too subdued; vague brakes

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£46,560	82kWh battery, twin e-motors, all-wheel drive	335bhp, 501lb ft, 5.4sec 0-62mph, 111mph	2154kg	3.8 miles per kWh, 339-mile range, 0g/km CO2	Now

TOYOTA BZ4X

Got there in the end

A major overhaul makes the EV more efficient and better to drive

'Bumpy' is how Toyota describes the bZ4X's original launch in 2021. Which is putting it mildly. This was a car that should have been if nothing else efficient, given Toyota's decades of experience with electric motors and batteries in its hybrids. But it just didn't deliver, and few had a kind word to say about it.

It was a weird-looking, bland-driving crossover that was so inefficient you'd wonder if it would make it down your driveway. So Toyota went back to the drawing board, pulled the whole thing apart and figured out how it could make the bZ4X better. We're trying a prototype version of the revised car in close to production-ready form.

The new battery packs (57.7kWh and 73.1kWh) have entirely new cooling systems and more cells per stack, increasing density and efficiency, while revised pre-conditioning means it can charge at a faster rate for longer. Next-gen 'eAxle' motors get more power, with the base model generating 165bhp, the mid-level version benefitting from 221bhp and the flagship equipped with 338bhp. Engineers have also obsessed over how to reduce energy losses in the motors, resulting in 275, 354 and 314-mile range claims for those three versions.

The exterior design has also been made to look a smidge cleaner with better aero and a new 'hammerhead' face, while the interior has had some (only some, mind you) of its annoying quirks and design details removed in favour of something more sensible.

Elements of the bZ4X's fundamentals remain. The name, for instance, isn't going anywhere – despite Toyota admitting the whole 'bZ' thing didn't work and reverting to familiar names with other cars. It's still a bit of an oddball to look at, which is a shame when some modern Toyotas like the Prius and the Crown look so slick. And the boot space is dwarfed by a Skoda Enyaq or a Smart #5. But some fundamentals are good, like the roomy rear space, suitable for actual adults, and the fact the steering has a truly feelsome weight and fluidity to it that precious little else in this class offers.

Hurrah – Toyota's un-weirded the interior

The mid-level front-wheel-drive model with the larger battery will almost certainly be the biggest seller and offers the best balance. The amount of performance on offer is enough here – no more, no less – and allows just a smidge of boost for overtaking. The more potent all-wheel-drive model certainly has some extra shove, pulling well even when you're already at motorway speeds. The larger wheels on our model came with noisy tyres, though, compared to the quiet calm we experienced at motorway speed with the front-wheel-drive model.

Overall, though, the changes have been a net positive, turning the bZ4X from a car we wouldn't give the time of day to one that has its appeal. Its efficiency improvements make the most tangible difference. A 62-mile test run that combined country roads, stretches of high-speed motorway and some urban cut-and-thrust netted a respectable 3.8 miles per kWh – much more than the old one could ever manage. It's still light on charisma, but at least the measurable basics are now in place.

JAKE GROVES

First verdict

Smoother, simpler and goes longer on a charge. Weird that it took Toyota four years to get here

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

2 minutes
Visual changes aren't huge, but the interior is less weird

9 minutes
Still has the high driving position, but it's comfy in here

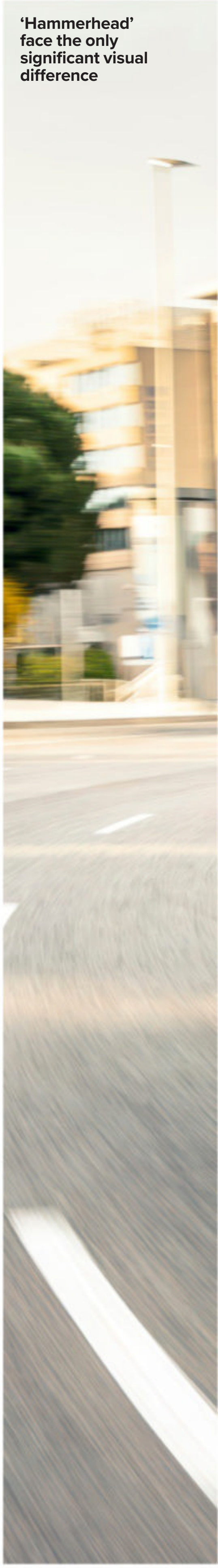
24 minutes
Front-driven versions are quick enough, AWD is potent

46 minutes
Cool and calm on the road, with lovely steering

59 minutes
3.8 miles per kWh over 62 miles? Good

PLUS
Much better efficiency; improved interior; sweet steering

MINUS
Fiddly safety tech; AWD versions have noisy tyres; not exactly dazzling with charm


'Hammerhead' face the only significant visual difference

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	From £44,000 (est)	73.1kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive	221bhp, 198lb ft, 7.4sec 0-62mph, 99mph	1930kg	4.8 miles per kWh, 354-mile range (claimed), 0g/km CO2	End of 2025

PROTOTYPE
S 4749 BCL

The upgrades turn it from a car we wouldn't give the time of day to one that has appeal

After all the talk about innovation, driving the first Neue Klasse car is pretty normal, in a good way

Steers well, with extra firmness in Sport mode

BMW iX3

Vive la revolution

The Neue Klasse iX3 will form the basis for all new BMWs. No pressure, then…

It was August 2020 when BMW started to worry about the world. When the rest of the globe was distracted by Covid and what it was doing to society, BMW had a long, hard look in the mirror and didn't like what it saw. EV development was changing rapidly and the Bavarians thought they were in danger of being left behind.

Task forces were formed, engineers were recruited, strategies were created. Nothing was off the table – revolution was in the air! – and the resulting camouflaged prototype is before me now, a game-changing new car that will define BMW for the next decade.

And the shape this seminal car takes? Drum roll please, audience waiting with bated breath… it's a family SUV.

But instead of feeling like a deflated balloon, we should perk up because it's much more radical under the skin, with wholesale changes from the previous car of the same name. It all starts with something called the Heart of Joy.

Stomach-retching name aside, this and three other black boxes are essentially computer control units that have allowed BMW to vastly increase not only the car's capabilities but also its reactions. How? Because they're both faster (up to 10 times quicker at processing) and also simpler than a traditional CAN-bus system. Instead of lots of systems shouting over the top of one another, the four can coordinate every aspect of the car much more clearly.

It's not the only new bit. Instead of prismatic cells, the iX3 uses cylindrical ones for better energy density (up to 20 per cent) and increased cooling. They're inserted direct, cell-to-pack, which means there's more flexibility to add or delete capacity, compared to the more traditional multiple module arrangement. These cylindrical cells can also contribute to the structural stiffness of the car.

No word on the battery capacity yet but BMW claims nearly 500 miles on a charge. We achieved 3.7 miles per kWh on our ▶

FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Camouflage rules out judging the looks, but it's definitely lower than the X3

10 minutes
Brake pedal feel is superb, inspiring confidence

12 minutes
Our first speed hump. Steel springs and manual dampers ace it

25 minutes
A meaningful corner and the iX3 deals with it well. Steering is direct

55 minutes
Back at the track and it bobbles a bit over some surfaces

PLUS
Great body control; innovative interior; charging speed; range

MINUS
Slight firmness to the suspension

iX3 turns in with more agility than you expect from a family SUV

No clever dampers but it rides well

Most of the cabin is disguised but Panoramic Vision works well

> **An M3 with all this technology turned up to 11 is an unbelievable prospect**

short test route, which is pretty decent. This prototype has two electric motors, one at each end, and all-wheel drive, but versions of the iX3 with just a rear motor and rear-wheel drive will also be available.

The car runs 800-volt architecture like the Porsche Taycan and Hyundai Ioniq 5, so charging is now faster (up to 217 miles added in 10 minutes; the Porsche Macan will do 155 miles) and the car even has an AI-enabled charge flap so it learns when you stop and might need to juice up. What exactly is wrong with a simple push-to-open flap is anyone's guess.

The electric motors are BMW's own and point to much more vertical supply-chain integration by BMW. It wants to control more of what it's putting in its cars, which has worked well for both Ferrari and BYD.

There's also a new interior set-up that BMW regards as revolutionary. It had better be good, because BMW has committed to using it in all its cars, whether they're electric or combustion. Key to the infotainment is Panoramic Vision, a display that runs along the base of the windscreen from pillar to pillar to complement the head-up display and touchscreen.

If that makes you nervous – given that BMW infotainment seems to have been going backwards for a couple of years – I'm happy to assure you that it really does work. Your eyes flit naturally between head-up display, Panoramic Vision and the road, and never feel strained. The clearly labelled tiles in Panoramic Vision are much less of a distraction than the traditional touchscreen. Honestly, this takes what was good about iDrive and brings it up to date.

But don't be misled by all this talk about the digital future, because the predominant feeling when you drive the iX3 is how normal it seems. Having had months of talk from BMW about how innovative the Neue Klasse generation will be, actually driving the first manifestation of the new philosophy is pretty normal, in a good way.

The ride quality is good, if our short route is anything to go by. The set-up is conventional – steel springs, passive twin-tube dampers – but the way the car deals with most bumps is well controlled, with no secondary movement after the interruption.

Expect a new look once the disguise is off

My only warning flag is a series of short lumps in the tarmac, because the car is quite firmly sprung and that sort of repetition might not let the dampers do their thing.

The brakes are great, not only in terms of pedal feel and pressure but also in the way you can bring the car to a stop in a smooth glide. Thank the regen. BMW thinks that 98 per cent of iX3 braking will use regen only. The engineers have tuned it in such a way that halting for a traffic light brings zero head bobbing. Seriously – I closed my eyes at one point and couldn't tell when we'd stopped. It helps bring a sense of serenity.

Being an SUV it's relatively high-riding but it doesn't wallow through bends – BMW won't say what it weighs but it must be 2.3-2.5 tonnes, and yet the weight transfer is well controlled. There's a Sport mode that adds a bit more weight and feel to the steering, but even in Normal it's fine.

A bigger shock comes with the driver aids as they actually work well, at least on the deserted test track we try them on. The lane-keep assist is now intelligent enough to work with the driver, to the point where I don't think I'd bother to turn it off. The speed limit bong is more intrusive, but fortunately there's a shortcut button right by the steering wheel to turn it off.

The sheer normality is what sets the iX3 apart. It's given BMW the chance to stretch the tech but without feeling overwhelming. Driving the car involves no controversy and no eureka moment. It feels just like a car. No readjustment required, no brain frying.

The Neue Klasse philosophy should work across a broad spectrum, giving hope for the imminent 3-series. And there's potential for it to handle more of everything – an M3 with all this turned up to 11 is an unbelievable prospect.

From BMW's perspective, Neue Klasse must feel radical. For the driver, it's something much better than that: an extremely good car.

PIERS WARD

First verdict

Brilliantly normal, if that's not damning with faint praise. If this is the future, it's looking rosy for BMW

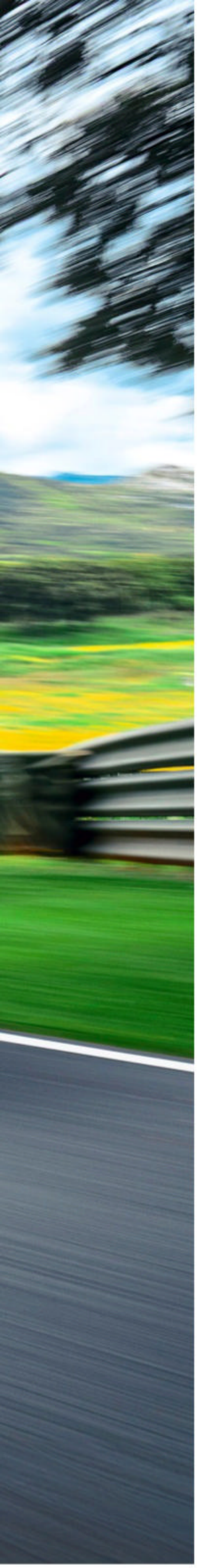
★★★★☆

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£75,000 (est)	100kWh battery (est), two e-motors, all-wheel drive	400bhp-plus, 440lb ft-plus, sub-5.0sec 0-62mph	2300kg (est)	3.7 miles per kWh (tested), 497-mile range (est), 0g/km CO2	2026

It's a mighty thing. Whether it will boost Lucid's sales is another question

Sapphire demos hyper EV pace with incredible efficiency



LUCID AIR SAPPHIRE

Blowing a gale

Sapphire version transforms the Air into something much wilder

Remember the Subaru Spec D Impreza? A glorious riposte to all the wings 'n' tings of the rally homologation craze of the '90s and 2000s, it offered all the performance that Colin McRae could have wanted in a body that wasn't going to get your collar felt repeatedly by the local plod. Step forward nearly 20 years and the Lucid Air Sapphire is aiming for much the same.

Looking incredibly similar to the standard Air, save for a couple of bits of carbon and a small ducktail rear spoiler, the Sapphire is an electrical engineering tour de force that demonstrates just what the wizards at Lucid are capable of.

Under the skin, they've rung the changes. Running a tri-motor set-up (two at the back, one at the front, and one more than the Air Grand Touring), it produces some 1234bhp and 1431lb ft. With a 0-62mph time of 2.0sec, it'll match all of the fastest saloons. Porsche's Taycan Turbo GT, minus the Lucid's roomy rear seats, takes 2.3 seconds.

To cope with all this, the Air Sapphire has a stiffer rear anti-roll bar and spring rates, new damper settings, bespoke torque vectoring and traction control, more camber, new tyres, new steering; but still all wrapped up in a relatively traditional three-box saloon body.

Lucid's USP – that of greater efficiency than virtually every other rival – remains thanks to a clean-sheet design, with a single-minded approach that makes Elon Musk's work ethic look a bit slack. Take the headlights: some clever engineering involving a part called the collimator (essentially the bit that focuses the LEDs' output) has resulted in the Air getting unusually small lamp units, giving better aero and a bigger frunk. It's a classic case of all the percentages adding up.

Alcantara interior, so you know it's fast

Out on track – we never drove it on the road – the changes yield a serious transformation. Where the standard Air feels flaccid on the circuit, the Sapphire is sharp and decisive. The steering could do with more feel – it's direct but a bit disconnected – but otherwise it feels like it's been dosed with Ozempic, such is the way it disguises its weight. Bodyroll is extremely well contained and it never feels like the car is getting away from itself.

Sure, you've got to be careful with the throttle in the middle of a corner – it doesn't feel like a car that wants to be hustled – but if you're gentle and smooth with your inputs it's incredibly delicate. The odd thing is that it doesn't feel that quick. Maybe it's because it's so well engineered that the pace feels comfortably within its capabilities.

I like the subtlety of it – cover it in 2000 miles of road grime and few people would give it a second look – but that does mean it might struggle as the halo car Lucid needs. There's no doubting its capability, but will the Sapphire help shift the Lucid needle? It's a brand that should be dominating – who doesn't want an EV with a 400-mile range? – but it needs more of a profile.

It's not Lucid's way to shout about these things and maybe that'll pay off in the end, but it feels like the Sapphire needed to be a fraction more brash in bragging about its capabilities.

PIERS WARD

First verdict

A marvel of engineering that shows what can be done when laser-focused clever people put their minds to it

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Sapphire paint and carbon wing mirror caps look great glinting in the Spanish sun

4 minutes
It's quick, but not as outrageously fast as I expected it to be

10 minutes
Gentle with the throttle before the apex. Grip is good, but there's only so much that the tyres can do with 1234bhp

15 minutes
The brakes are a bit grabby in full safety mode. Switch to Track traction control for a better response

21 minutes
Cool-down lap mandatory. This is an impressive EV on track but those batteries need careful management

PLUS

Front end grip; pace; great body control

MINUS

Pricey even for a warp-speed EV: generic styling

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	From €250,000	118kWh battery, three e-motors, all-wheel drive	1234bhp, 1431lb ft, 2.0sec 0-62mph, 205mph	2420kg	3.2 miles per kWh, 431-mile range, 0g/km CO2	Now (but not in UK)

FIAT PANDA HYBRID

Fiat at its best

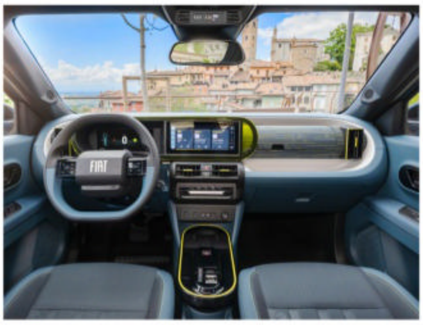
Panda Hybrid brims with style and humour, while staying affordable

Flip through Fiat's storied history books and its most successful models have invariably been small cars with big personalities; cars whose appeal combines effervescent charm, affordability and real-world practicality with an overly generous dollop of style. The new Grande Panda absolutely bullseyes this formula. Just look at it. This is the new Hybrid variant, visually identical to the electric version we drove earlier in the year.

Its mild hybrid hardware marries a turbocharged 1199cc three-cylinder petrol unit with a 28bhp electric motor and a 48-volt lithium-ion battery, driving the front wheels through a six-speed double-clutch gearbox. Economy and emissions figures of 56.5mpg and 115g/km for an achievable 500-odd miles between brims are impressive – a modest 108bhp and 151lb ft for a 10sec ramble to 62mph and a top speed of 99mph perhaps less so.

But here's the thing – this Panda is a delight to drive, exhibiting a composure and maturity that's as unexpected as it is welcome. It's entertainingly nippy off the line, so slicing and dicing through heavy traffic is a hoot. At speeds below 18mph the Panda will run on electricity for just over half a mile and it will happily work its way up to motorway speeds without strain or drama.

The steering is well-weighted and direct, the all-disc brakes are strong with plenty of initial bite, and the front MacPherson strut and rear twist-beam suspension soaks up all but the worst intrusions, with only pronounced ridges, expansion joints and potholes disturbing the calm of the cabin. It can get a little fidgety and brittle at low speeds when tackling acned tarmac, but it's not a deal breaker by any means. And it's a neat and tidy handler, too. Body control is good, and even when hustling it along the Panda feels poised and collected. It's a composed and undemanding car to drive – exactly what you want when tackling fast-paced city traffic.


Nods to the past, embraces the future

And of course, you get to enjoy that cabin while you drive it. The oval dashboard is inspired by the test track atop the Lingotto building in Turin, Fiat's historic headquarters, complete with a model of Giorgetto Giugiaro's original Panda in the bottom corner; the Fiat corporate logo is emblazoned on the door cards; the bamboo-wrapped 'Bambox' dash-top storage unit; the boxy left and right air vents recall the right-angled original Panda – they more than make up for some unyielding dash and door plastics and some slightly rough edges here and there.

It's spacious up front and just roomy enough in the back for two tall adults on longer trips, or three on shorter commutes. Those deeply cushioned seats are supportive and comfortable, the regularly-shaped boot holds a decent 412 litres (361 litres for the EV version, which loses boot space its batteries) or 1366 litres (1315 for the electric model) with the rear seats folded forward.

Prices start at £18,035, and specification levels are decent. So much about it feels right. This a fine example of a car that's been created to be absolutely fit for purpose.

BEN WHITWORTH

First verdict

A compelling package that ticks all the right boxes with a high-fiving confidence that rivals will struggle to match

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

5 minutes
What a thing to pore over – genuinely arresting style with an £18k price tag

12 minutes
Tailpipe and no charging flap the only visual giveaways

32 minutes
Really refined, smooth and relaxed to drive; not typical Fiat qualities

45 minutes
Muted hybrid drivetrain does a fine job of balancing pep and parsimony

52 minutes
Some particularly scarred Torinese roads wrong-foots the suspension and upsets the cabin's calm

PLUS

Powertrain refinement; urban zip; practicality; value; design

MINUS

Occasionally brittle low-speed ride quality; rear accommodation is snug

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
From £18,035 (Pop spec)	1199cc turbo triple, six-speed dual-clutch auto, front-wheel drive	108bhp @ 5500rpm, 151lb ft @ 1750rpm, 10sec 0-62mph, 99mph	1380kg	56.5mpg (official), 115g/km CO2	September

If Timmy Mallett designed cars

It drives with a composure and maturity as unexpected as it is welcome

> It makes light work of towing, off-roading and general shenanigans

Highly capable off road, and very good on as well

FORD RANGER PHEV

Diamond geyser

Is the plug-in version the best Ranger as well as the most tax-efficient? Driving it in Iceland leaves us in no doubt

Any moment now, someone might well start World War 3. And should that happen, this new Ford Ranger plug-in hybrid is almost exactly the kind of vehicle you're suddenly going to need.

We'll get to the 'almost' part in a moment. Right now, halfway up an Icelandic volcano, it looks like the world already has ended: in a mash-up between *Jurassic Park* and James Bond, the terrain is a blend of bleak, weather-blasted scrubland where nearly nothing grows taller than a small shrub and the ground is literally venting steam, and clusters of futuristic pod-like structures in a variety of raw metal finishes, linked by networks of curiously chaotic-looking pipeline.

They are not Bond villain-related at all, and in fact the opposite of the end of the world: the pipes and buildings are all connected to the future-friendly geothermal energy industry, generating power and moving naturally pre-heated water. These basics of modern living are both abundant and inexpensive in Iceland. Nearby there are actual carbon-capture enterprises in operation, and funky high-tech greenhouses that exist to counteract the reality that it's really difficult to grow anything except sheep on this island. Desolate isn't exactly the word, but it's close.

Whatever the symbolism of all this, the plug-in Ranger is the perfect response to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs closing the double-cab tax loophole. Up until April, as long as your five-seat pick-up could carry a tonne in the back it was classed as a commercial vehicle – no matter how luxuriously appointed it was on the inside. Now they're classed largely as cars (you can still claim the VAT back if the payload makes the magic 1000kg) and because of their typically hefty CO2 emissions this has sent benefit-in-kind rates rocketing.

The Ranger PHEV officially scores 70-72g/km, making it the cheapest useful pick-up to carry on running as a company car. ▶

THE FIRST HOUR

1 minute
Various ways of reshaping the load area: useful

10 minutes
Very quiet – the active noise cancelling really works

25 minutes
No lack of performance, especially when the load bed's empty. And the typically clunky 10-speed seems smoother than usual

48 minutes
Ride is good. But you'll feel it when the surface is rippled

60 minutes
It's big enough to be a pain to park, but elsewhere it's surprisingly deft

PLUS

Undented off-road performance; unruffled on-road performance; mobile workshop potential

MINUS

Electric-only range is unimpressive; load space is 20mm shallower

WILDTRAK
Ford
RANGER
K RP 7719 E

Plug in and power accessories, on the move or stationary

> **The ride quality is remarkable for a pick-up, and it's a grippy and predictable companion over an undulating road**

Thus endeth today's accountancy lesson.

Now that's out of the way, let's get into why you're probably going to want one of these instead of the diesel alternatives anyway. For starters, it has 514lb ft of torque. That's more than any other Ranger – including the Raptor – and makes light work of towing, off-roading and general shenanigans. Driving about on a volcano sounds dramatic, and sure does look it in places. But this Ranger isn't taking any trouble over it. Despite the addition of a 11.8kWh battery pack under the load floor, ground clearance is unaffected. It will still ford 800mm of water, and you have access to a whole host of off-road driving modes of the kind Land Rover used to make such a fuss about. Not to mention hill descent control, an electronically lockable rear differential, and a 10-speed automatic transmission with high and low settings for the all-wheel-drive system.

Tell this 277bhp truck you're going off-road (via one of the largest buttons on the centre console) and it primes the cameras to help you as well. Especially handy over crests, where the forward-facing item allows you to see what's happening ahead below your line of sight when the Ranger's nose is pointed at the heavens. And because of the giant nature of the portrait-orientated infotainment panel, this only takes up half the touchscreen.

Our route included multiple water crossings and some impressively steep gradients, giving the tech-assisted hardware many opportunities to show how well it can perform. The Ranger even demonstrates a decent amount of axle articulation, which isn't always a given in a pick-up. Plus, it still manages to hit all the right utility statistics: payload in the UK is at least 1046kg, and 3500kg towing is right on the limit for what's legal, matching the best of the rest in this sector. And, no, that's not the wrong way round when last year over 52 per cent of new pick-ups sold in the UK were Rangers.

It's a 4x4 capable of serious off-road feats without compromising its on-road competence. With a fundamental – ladder-frame, natch – structure that's been on the market since 2011, Ford has got this thing dialled. Yes, it shudders and shimmies more than any competent SUV at this price point, but in leaf-spring load-hauling terms the ride quality is remarkable, and it's a grippy and predictable companion over an undulating road. More dependable than, say, a Jeep Wrangler.

There's a reason you so often see these big Fords steaming past you at 90mph or more on the motorway – they feel rock solid and unstoppable in this milieu as well, with nicely weighted and ratio'd steering, and a cab that's every bit as well-appointed as your Audi or BMW. Better in some respects, as the Ranger uses active noise cancelling to boost refinement. Here that makes seamless work of the motive transition between the electric motor built into the transmission and the 2.3-litre EcoBoost petrol four.

This engine has been tried and tested in other Ranger markets for years now, and with plug-in hybrid assistance is supposedly good for 88-90mpg WLTP. You can, correctly, file that under: yeah, right. The official electric-only range is a paltry 25.2 miles, or 21 miles on my drive. That's not a very impressive eco-effort in 2025.

However, there's another aspect to the plug-in Ranger that ought to shoot it further up the most-wanted charts for working artisans, roof-tent aficionados and doomsday preppers alike. You can plug stuff into it as well as it into the mains. An optional Pro Power Onboard system gets you a trio of sockets that can draw from the lithium-ion drive battery, turning this truck into a massive – and silent – self-propelling generator. Better yet, unlike all-electric Fords such as the F-150 Lightning, when the Ranger's li-ions are expended the combustion engine can keep the lights/log-splitter/craft beer fridge functioning. It'll charge while driving, too. Multi-purpose to the nines, goes almost anywhere just fine. Love it.

CJ HUBBARD

First verdict

Want an actual multi-purpose vehicle and not a marketing scheme? This is it. The best version of a great product

★★★★☆

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£53,880 (Wildtrak PHEV, inc VAT)	11.8kWh battery, 2261cc turbo four-cyl, e-motor, 10-speed auto, all-wheel drive	277bhp @ 4600rpm, 514lb ft @ 2500rpm, 8.7sec 0-62mph, 105mph	2560kg	88-90mpg, 25.5 miles of electric range, 70-72g/km CO2	Now

Opinion

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Extraordinary cars deserve extraordinary stories

Letter of the month

Outstanding

Outstanding piece of motoring journalism by Mark Walton on the Defender Octa and the Ariel Nomad in the June issue. A real pleasure to read. A perfect example of the reasons why I am faithful to *CAR* magazine.
Giuseppe Papuli

Yes. (And when a story like that hits my inbox, I feel very privileged to be the first person on the planet to read it.) CO

Wires crossed

There's no reason why drive by wire shouldn't be a thing. The aerospace defence industry has been doing it for decades. I saves space and weight. Personally, though, I hate the idea. I want as much mechanical interaction as I can get with a car. In fact, I de-powered the steering rack on my MX-5 to get as much interaction with the car as possible.

For your average person, though, I understand. Make things as easy feeling as possible. However, that's the whole reason why I still have a 1991 MX-5. Simple to work on, even as highly modified as mine is. There's very little on it that I haven't touched right down to the paint – silver but not Silverstone Silver. My silver is the result of four different silvers being mixed together. I think the only thing I haven't modified is the brake calipers, but that's more due to funds than anything.

Enough about me, though; drive by wire is the future.
Bill Kim

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Shoehorn ahoy

Lovely article by Georg Kacher in the May issue. We have been entertained and informed by Georg since he started writing for *CAR* in '74. I am not quite as tall as Georg at only 6ft 4in. For me, whether I can fit comfortably in a car is a prime purchase consideration. Georg never comments on this aspect during test drives – it's more about the dynamics, equipment, innovation and design, never about how he shoehorns his ample frame into the tested vehicle. Always written in an entertaining style belying the fact that English is not his first language, another point of admiration for me.

What an asset he has been to the magazine with his insights and contacts, especially in and from Germany. The article gave us a previously undisclosed (to us readers) side to the big man's character, his eclectic collection of cars past and present. Something for every occasion and quite a few I admired.

I am so pleased he intends to keep on entertaining and informing us.
Bryn Owen

No ducks, but plenty of Deluxe: Georg and his Bentley

Rounding error

Georg Kacher's article in the May issue on the ownership of his Bentley T1 was a very enjoyable read. However, the price of £35,000 in 1973 quoted on the final page is way out of line. In April 1973, the list price of a Bentley T1 was £10,406 inclusive of tax.
Chris Mason

Deal breaker

I'm a true Alfisti, although not 100 per cent sure if I'm still able to say that as we no longer own one. I've loved the brand from a very young age, having lived near Italian families in Glasgow, drooling over their cars, then when I was old enough going round Alfa dealerships and doing a bit of slabbering too. Then later going to shows or Italian car days, collecting all the brochures – remember them? – and eventually living the dream of owning 156s, 159s and a Stelvio QV.

Reading your brilliant review of the 33 Stradale (June issue) sends me into another tizzy. I love this brand – but our recent ownership experience has been so poor due to the dealer network.

I'm pleased to see new boss Santo Ficili pledging to do something about the dealerships. Please get building some sexy (and affordable) cars again that I can have a wee slabber over, and make sure the cars get the dealers they deserve.
Karen Elder

It's our fault

While you're waxing lyrical about old Porsches ('Bargain Used Porsches',

May issue) the internet is awash with videos about the innovative new cars at the Shanghai motor show. I just watched a review on YouTube about the Nio ET9 – an amazing car – the future direction of cars surely.

What a contrast – no wonder Europe and the US are years behind the Chinese.

Mark Knight

Unexpected

I have a Porsche 968 CS and a VW Golf Mk 7 GTD. Both have covered 70k miles. Not only has the 968 proven to be the more bulletproof, the pace and chassis make it better at dodging the bullets in the first place. The 968 is a keeper (25 years) but my VW money is going to an EV/hybrid from another manufacturer.

Nick Bromley

Real prices

The Peugeot E-2008 hit your letters pages recently because of its apparently huge depreciation, and yet the real issue is a huge disparity between list price and new price. The list price for the car was £42,060, and yet you can walk into a dealer and buy a new 25-plate car from stock for under £23,000. That £20k reduction drops the depreciation down to just £1k.

Tim Irons

EV does it

I regularly use my Jaguar i-Pace to journey to the Scottish Highlands from South Bucks, and my experience of the charging infrastructure is not at all like the horror stories I often read in *CAR*, at least in the M40, M6, M74 corridor that I travel. I have a choice of Tesla, Ionity, MFG, Gridserve, Applegreen and Instavolt chargers, all at 150kW or more at various locations on or close to the motorway, and the network continues to expand.

I can count the number of failed or slow charges on one hand. Yes, electric cars cannot be refuelled as quickly as combustion cars, but I have for the most part found that makes the journey more enjoyable. Haste is perhaps the most over-rated element of travel in this impatient world.

Greg Bale

Couldn't agree more, Greg. Truly your are wise. BM

Hard to understand

I'm confounded by some car interiors made with hard, brittle plastics. VW has moved, price-wise, severely upmarket. And while its cars have lovely, soft-touch plastics in the front, the materials are harder and brittle-feeling in the rear. Similarly, some Hyundais I've sat in have scratchy plastics all over. Given the volumes of cars they build, they could surely get better-quality materials for similar base costs from their suppliers?

Rod Davies

Sling your hook, Porsche. BYD's here now

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‘Silly rules killed off the small petrol hatch, probably the world’s most energy efficient car’

GAVIN GREEN
THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

The *Financial Times*’ recent Future of the Car summit gave me confidence in the future of the car. One of the main lessons was that European cars need to be more European, and hooray to that. In eloquent addresses, the bosses of Europe’s two biggest non-German cars makers, Luca de Meo of Renault and John Elkann of Stellantis, said Europe needs to make more inexpensive small cars. ‘Our roots are in small cars,’ noted Elkann. ‘They were really the driving force of our prosperity.’ Small cars can reboot the European market, added de Meo.

In the last 20 years Europe has lost the small-car knack, and European car makers, European consumers, European cities and the European environment – and I include Britain – have suffered.

Desperate to succeed in prospering China and in more prosperous America, many European makers produce cars better suited to new Chinese cities than to old European ones; to US interstates and boulevards not European back roads. They have prioritised global consumers, not European ones.

As de Meo said: ‘The medieval streets in Salamanca, Siena and Heidelberg haven’t changed dimensions in 20 years. And [there’s no space] to make the garage bigger.’ He also pointed out that the proportion of cars under four metres built by European makers has shrunk from 50 per cent in the ’80s to five per cent now.

And as our car makers turned their backs on us, so we turned our backs on them, embracing small Japanese, Korean and (now) Chinese cars instead. All European small petrol hatches have gone. No more Ups, 108s, C1s, Adams, Twingos or Ka Fords.

A similar sorry story is happening in the one-size-up B-segment class, as witnessed by the death of the Fiesta, until recently Britain’s best-selling car. Instead, Ford prefers to build a big electric Explorer SUV: eco posturing not eco progress.

Now, China and America are turning their backs on Europe. Chinese consumers increasingly buy their own brands. Trump tariffs will likely force America to do the same. Europe’s car makers will need to rely more on Europe.

Europe’s meddlesome legislators have made a bad situation worse. Silly rules, supposedly to help the environment, effectively killed off the small petrol hatch, probably the world’s most energy efficient car from cradle-to-grave, and the lowest lifetime carbon emitter.

Tough emissions tests made it expensive to engineer petrol (or diesel) cars. The profit margin on small cars is thin, and the scope for price rises limited. So, car makers killed them and concentrated on building bigger and more profitable models while simultaneously engineering expensive new electric cars, mostly large. As Stellantis’ then-boss Carlos Tavares told me a year ago, the legislation to improve the environment, absurdly, favours big cars.

The legislation is half-baked, as with most automotive rule-making over the decades. It confuses tailpipe emissions with lifecycle impact. Thomas Ingenlath, ex-boss of Polestar, lobbied for transparency on total vehicle carbon emissions. Sadly, this has so far fallen on deaf ears. Instead of legislation to punish small cars, we need rules to encourage them.

One way to promote smallness is to punish bulk, by taxing weight. It is to push primary safety (avoiding an accident) rather than, as now, prioritising secondary safety (surviving an accident). It is to focus on pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists and small car drivers rather than, as now, rules that favour bulky cars that cushion their occupants in a crash but are more likely to harm everyone else. It is to encourage lower emissions, not fixate on impractical zero emissions.

Perhaps most important of all, Europe needs to make desirable small cars again. Cars that look great and are ideal for our narrow city streets and small country roads; that have the latest tech and are fun to drive. Small cars that are affordable, profitable and, with a view to the future, increasingly electric. Cars like the new Renault 5.

Lean-running and efficient, former *CAR* editor Gavin Green is now one of the world’s foremost commentators on automotive matters

Peter Strain

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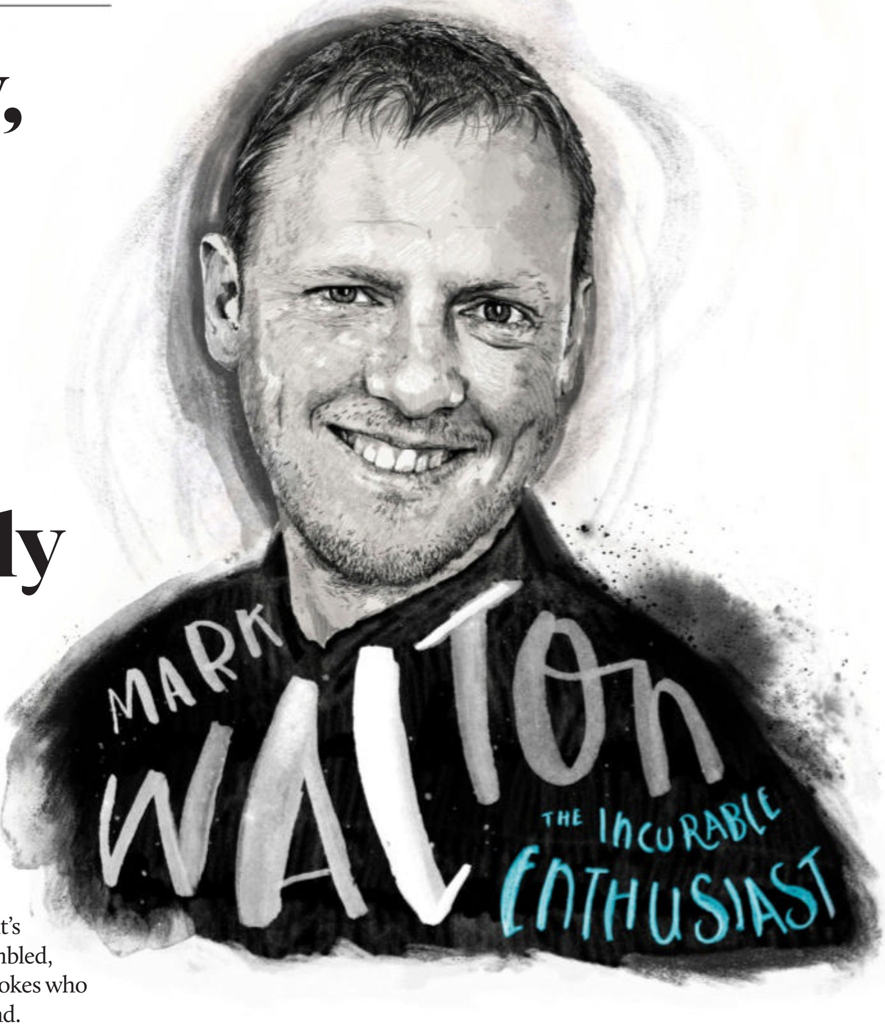
‘Straight away, the results – like so many AI projects these days – were absolutely staggering’



Haircuts are not something I look forward to, and it’s not because I have to stare at my thinning locks in a mirror. No, it’s the small talk – the mumbled, half-hearted Q&A between two blokes who aren’t interested but have to pretend.

‘Busy today?’ ‘Not really.’ Silence…

It’s even worse in a taxi, when the driver says something but then he’s facing away from you and there’s the noise of the diesel engine and you’re separated by a sheet of perspex. Mumble-mumble, engine noise, mumble, glance-in-the-rear-view-mirror? ‘Sorry! I can’t hear you!’ It’s excruciating.

Which is why I was pleased to hear that next year Uber is going to start trialling driverless taxis in the UK. Oh the relief! I’ll just climb in the back, close my eyes and relax, safe in the knowledge that this two-tonne, high-voltage, electric projectile is being algorithmically steered at high speed through constantly moving obstacles and oh-God-I’ve-got-no-wi-fi-how-is-the-car-doing-this?!?!

Whatever – frankly, I’d rather run the gauntlet of autonomous driving than make small talk about the weather.

But delve a little deeper and there may be trouble ahead. Because Uber is teaming up with a British company called Wayve, which has quickly become a front runner in the race to develop self-driving cars. Founded in Cambridge in 2017 by Alex Kendall and Amar Shah, Wayve has taken a different approach to the problem of autonomy.

Until now, most systems create a lot of imaginary scenarios and instruct the car what to do. It’s taken years to refine, but handing over full autonomy is still proving difficult.

‘We’ve got good at detecting traffic lights, detecting pedestrians and other vehicles,’ explains Remi Tachet des Combes, principal scientist at Wayve. ‘Yet when we have all that information, the [software] models still struggle to make the proper decision at the correct time.’ It’s also very laborious. ‘All the rules are hand designed, so you have to code thousands – hundreds of thousands – of lines, telling you in which scenario the car should be doing this, which scenario the car should be doing that,’ Remi explains.

Wayve, however, uses ‘end-to-end’ learning: you simply feed in the data, through a camera, you teach the system (like you would a kid, learning to ride a bike), and allow the AI to work out the rest.

Straight away, the results – like so many AI projects these days – were absolutely staggering. Based out of a bedroom in their residential house in Cambridge, the team started with a Renault Twizy, of all things. With a driver onboard, correcting where needed, the Twizy learned how to stay in lane in just 20 minutes. Not surprisingly, investment soon came pouring in from the likes of Nvidia and Microsoft. But there’s more. When a ‘traditional’ self-driving car gets stuck at a junction, the developers can easily isolate that particular ‘junction module’ and work out where it went wrong. But with end-to-end AI, you have no idea why the system is making any particular decision – it just thinks its thoughts and gets on with it.

So Wayve decided to develop a ChatGPT-style language model and get the car to talk. At the moment, its Lingo-2 system simply narrates what it’s doing – ‘I’m turning left, I’ve stopped at the red light’ – but you can also type in questions as it’s driving along: ‘What’s the weather like?’ ‘The weather is cloudy,’ the car will reply. ‘What hazards do you see?’ ‘There is a school on the left.’

Kendall describes how they then started noticing some remarkable things. Type in an unrelated question – ‘How many storeys is the building on the right?’ – and the car replies: ‘Three storeys.’ ‘We never trained it to do that. It’s really amazed us,’ Kendall admits.

Oh God, but you can imagine what I’m thinking.

You climb aboard the Uber, relax in the back and close your eyes for five minutes of peace. But then, ‘Awful weather we’re having,’ the AI chirps up. ‘Not seen rain like this in months. Course, nobody knows how to drive in bad weather these days. And when it snows! They don’t all come to a halt in Switzerland when it snows do they?’

Editor-at-large Mark Walton loves F1, new cars, old cars, driving and writing about it all. But he’s not such a great passenger

Peter Strain

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BACK

Peugeot's original GTIs are among the greatest performance cars ever built. Now, the badge is back. But is the magic?

Words Ben Oliver **Photography** John Wycherley

GTI
T669 MLH

205 GTI (1984-1994)

EXCEPTIONAL IN THE ’80S

What do you write about the 205 GTI that hasn’t already been written? Maybe you don’t bother. Maybe instead you just go out and buy one, if they’re that good, knowing that as long as you buy well, the car’s reputation will put a floor under its value and – very necessary maintenance aside – you can enjoy free use of arguably the greatest-handling front-drive car ever made.

So that’s what I did. When this magazine celebrated its 50th birthday in 2012 we put 50 of the best cars we’d covered in that time on the cover. I resolved to buy one of them, and chose the 205 GTI, a 1.6 (not the car pictured here, which is a 1.9). I’ve now had it for longer than any other car, and longer than both my kids, who love it and already argue over who’ll get it when I croak. Having been inspired by the cover of *CAR*, my own 205 GTI has now graced it twice.

Or maybe rather than lionising the Lion’s greatest work yet again, you acknowledge the 205 GTI’s shortcomings. *CAR*’s iconoclastic contributor LJK Setright hated it when it was launched. ‘Setright has become notorious for failing to see why everybody else should be so wildly enthusiastic about the Peugeot 205,’ he wrote in 1984.

After 13 years of ownership, I’m not blind to those shortcomings. It idles lumpily, the steering is heavy when manoeuvring even by non-assisted standards, and the interior appears to be made of crisps. The first time I drove mine with my then wife, she neatly caught the rear-view mirror when it leapt off the windscreen as we took a small yump at pace. A very senior car industry executive borrowed it for a week and had to rewire the electric windows when they failed: he still offered to buy it, though.

Or maybe you try to find out something about the car that hasn’t already been written, and talk to Jean-Marc Finot, now the head of Stellantis Motorsport, who developed the new E-208 GTI but also worked on the 205 GTI when he first joined Peugeot in 1986. ‘The 1.6 handles better,’ he says definitively, settling the age-old argument. ‘We reduced the steering offset on the later “phase 1.5” cars, from 20mm to 12mm to be compatible with the ABS system. The steering was a little less edgy because of it. And did you know it understeers more on the left side than the right? The position of the torsion bar means you don’t get the same rear axle deformation on both sides. It’s bad news for you in the UK. You get less oversteer on roundabouts. Sorry.’

205 GTI (1.9)

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106 GTI (1996-2003)

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106 GTI

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EFFICIENCY 32.6mpg, 201g/km CO2
LEGACY When we wax nostalgic about light, agile, quick little cars, this (and very little else) is what we mean

Context isn't everything. The 205 GTI was Peugeot's first GTI and not only was it plainly brilliant but it was launched at a time when this breed of car was almost as exciting and desirable as a contemporary Testarossa or Countach, and as likely to appear on the cover of an '80s car magazine, moodily shot in a Welsh slate mine. By the time the 106 GTI came along in '96 we knew what Peugeot could do, and expected it to deliver. As cars iterate, surprise often gives way to disappointment. There was no disappointment with the 106 GTI, but it didn't have the impact of being first.

Its seven years on sale spanned two eras of hot hatch. When it launched a couple of years after the 205 GTI departed, hot hatches were still relatively light on both power and weight. In its later years – it was discontinued in 2003 – hot hatches were now more solid and expensive devices with thumping outputs of 200-plus horsepower. Think Honda Civic Type R with that supercar-standard jewel of a VTEC engine, or the Ford Focus RS with springs and dampers that probably cost its maker as much as it sold the entire car for.

Maybe we didn't appreciate the 106 GTI at the time. We do now. It was even smaller than the 205 and almost as flimsy, and used the same simple but very effective recipe, putting a bigger (though not expensive or complex) 1.6-litre 120bhp engine into a tiny body, and using the advantages of light weight and whatever weird handling alchemy Peugeot had then to make the thing feel fizzy and alive.

The 205 GTI continues to be the poster child for hotshoe Peugeots but we can hardly call the 106 GTI overlooked when the best will cost you over 10 grand now, and a good, stripped-out Rallye around £20k. Twenty grand! A '90s French city car for the same money as a good example of a contemporary 911. We wouldn't have predicted that at the time, but there's a younger breed of collectors who have the same teenage memories of these things as buyers now in their fifties have of the 205. And the utter simplicity of the 106 – a quality those later hot hatches like the Type R and Focus RS lack somewhat – is now a rare and desirable commodity.

306 GTI-6 (1996-2001)

GOOD AS GOLD

When I first drove a Peugeot 306 GTI-6 around the turn of the millennium I was a junior road tester. I was beginning my career as the 306 was retiring. The model had been introduced in '93 and the six-speed, 167bhp, 2.0-litre GTI-6 arrived in '96 and had already been around for four or five years by the time I finally got in one: it would be discontinued in 2001.

It already felt a little anachronistic then, when still technically 'new'. Times were changing quickly, if not quite as fast as today. The standard hatch-saloon hierarchies were shattering into niches. Faux-SUVs were on the rise, literally. Peugeot didn't bother making a hot version of the 306's more voluminous, upright 307 replacement, and hot hatches were changing too, getting faster, more complex, more expensive, more steroidal. Like its stablemate 106 GTI, this car represented a different and passing way of doing things. I remember pulling into services on the M1 to make some notes on the car. Despite my inexperience, I think I could see what was happening. What I wrote felt more like a eulogy than a review.

But the changing context only highlighted what Peugeot – mostly – did so well. What weird witchcraft still allowed it to make cars ride and steer and handle this well without resorting to trick materials and components and software? And as the heaviest of Peugeot's great hot hatches at 1214kg, the 306 GTI-6 proved that lightness alone wasn't the secret.

Now, with all those greats available to buy, you have a choice. If the freneticism of a 106 GTI or a 205 GTI is a bit too much, this car's more grown-up demeanour with its six-speed 'box, greater torque and better-made suede interior might be the one for you. You might lose a little of the size-dependent agility but none of the steering feel or the essential, imponderable rightness of the package.

Or you could go the other way: the 106, 205 and 306 all offered Rallye versions which dialled up the freneticism. The 306 Rallye used the same mechanical package as the GTI but cut the air-con and electric windows, 50kg from the mass, nearly a second from the 60mph time and nearly three grand from the price. The days when you could do that were passing then and they're long gone now. But the cars are still there in the classifieds.

306 GTI-6

PRICE NEW £17,258
VALUE NOW £7000+
POWERTRAIN 1998cc four-cylinder, six-speed manual, front-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 167bhp @ 6500rpm, 142lb ft @ 5500rpm, 8.5sec 0-62mph, 135mph
WEIGHT 1214kg
EFFICIENCY 35.3mpg, 231g/km CO2
LEGACY A trailblazer for the larger, more sophisticated hot hatches that followed, directly challenging the Golf

PEUGEOT
208
GTI
PEUGEOT

E-208 GTI (2026-)

CLEAN HEIR

'I was hired by Peugeot in 1986 and my first job was chassis tuning on the 205 GTI,' Jean-Marc Finot tells me. 'I worked a lot on those cars. I know every nut and bolt by heart. Of course I bought a personal one, a 1.9.

'I was working at the Peugeot plant in Sochaux in eastern France and I had dinner there with a friend one Friday evening, very late. I didn't drink anything because I had a girlfriend who lived in the Paris suburbs, maybe 500km away, and I wanted to see her that night. I think that drive is my best memory ever of travel, to enjoy the car and of course to see my girlfriend.

'The only thing I cannot say is how long it took me to get there…'

Nearly 40 years on, Finot is the director of Stellantis Motorsport. We spoke on the Monday after Le Mans. He looked tired. His two Peugeot 9X8 Hypercar-class racers finished a disappointing 12th and 17th, and amid the mayhem of that race he and his team also somehow found time to launch the E-208 GTI they had developed: the first time Peugeot has applied the GTI badge to an electric car.

The memory of the first Peugeot ever to bear that badge – and the first car he worked on in a long and stellar career at the company – lit Finot up, despite the fatigue. Maybe he was thinking about the girlfriend, too.

If you refuse to believe that this new GTI can have anything more than a badge in common with its forebear when it weighs nearly twice as much, Finot might change your mind. He knows, perhaps better than anyone else in the group, what that badge ought to mean.

The motorsport division he leads is also the Stellantis skunkworks devising and developing hot road cars. It keeps motorsport relevant, and justifies the expense. And the new GTI is genuinely the work of the same engineers who produced the 9X8, and shares some of the endurance racer's tech.

'Our motorsport engineers are like Swiss Army knives,' he says. 'Compared with corporate engineers, in the same brain you have 10 skills instead of one. In the morning, they might be working on the 9X8. In the afternoon, the 208 GTI.'

So, what have they produced? The weight may have doubled but the power from the French-made e-motor almost trebles the original 205's at 276bhp: that's also nearly twice the output of a standard E-208. Rather than being stripped out, the car's mass has crept up slightly to 1596kg, partly with the addition of a limited-slip differential to help get that power down cleanly – through the front wheels alone, in classic style.

The four-piston front brakes (the front discs are a massive 355mm across) work purely hydraulically in Sport mode, boldly

sacrificing regen and range for feel. Peugeot claims 217 miles from the 54kWh (gross) battery: we suspect it'll be a lot less when the car is driven as it ought to be.

Finot says the biggest single carryover from the 9X8 is the battery's thermal management, allowing it to charge and discharge very rapidly under braking and acceleration without breaching its temperature ceiling. Another engineer hints that the E-208 GTI is the only EV of its type which can complete a lap of the Nürburgring without overheating.

Top speed is limited to 112mph and it will reach 62mph in 5.7 seconds. That doesn't sound much in an era of sub-2.0sec electric saloons, but Peugeot hot hatches were always about usable, accessible, relevant ▶

THE FRONT BRAKE DISCS ARE A MASSIVE 355MM ACROSS AND WORK PURELY HYDRAULICALLY IN SPORT MODE, BOLDLY SACRIFICING REGEN AND RANGE FOR FEEL

performance: about the feel, not the numbers. The chassis has seen major revisions. It rides 30mm lower than the non-GTI version of the E-208, with the track pushed out by 56mm at the front and 27mm at the rear. The back end also gets a much thicker anti-roll bar to balance roll stiffness across the axles and improve the feel and immediacy of the steering.

Michelin (of course) has developed specific 205-section Sport Cup 2 tyres to sit on 18-inch rims visually inspired by the later 205 GTI 1.9's 15-inch Speedlines. You can decide for yourself on the other design revisions, but man, it's red.

I tell Finot that we're not expecting him to bend the laws of physics with this car, but he hints that maybe he can.

'I would say a major skill we have for tuning in Stellantis Motorsport is to remove all the feeling of weight from a car. We have of course a heavy battery, but it sits well down in the car, so we are enjoying that stability with the lower centre of gravity. And many things are compensating for that weight: the power of the engine mainly, and the big brakes. I promise you, when you drive it, you will need to read the technical data to know how much it weighs.'

But will it be as exciting as a 205 GTI? Can there actually be any palpable, tangible similarity between the two? Can he recapture that famous feel? Yes, apparently.

'The main difference we put in the 205 GTI was steering feeling like a razor's edge. Our competitors at that time – the Renault 5 Turbo, the Golf GTI – all had far less precise steering feeling,' says Finot. 'The 205 was closer to a racing car. We also made roadholding very special. You could manage the trajectory with the throttle and just a little bit of steering angle. You can't do the same today because it's not socially acceptable. But it has the same DNA, and for the feeling I am very confident we will do something as exciting as the 205.'

But I wonder what that GTI badge means to a new and younger generation of car buyers. Production ended in 1994, so to have driven one new you'd be at least 48 now, and you wouldn't have got insured on one aged 17 anyway. Buyers now in their twenties or thirties didn't have 205 GTIs on their bedroom walls. It's a proper classic now and fast appreciating in value, but to those younger buyers it's always been a classic. If they want one, it's because they've read us motoring journalists banging on about its significance.

The impact it had directly when new is already sliding backwards out of our collective motoring memory, and some of the other GTI Peugeots that followed were not quite as successful as the 205. I ask Finot if that badge remains relevant.

'I am an engineer,' he says. 'We are in charge of the car's development. We are not in marketing, so I'll give my personal feeling knowing this car. When we made the first GTI we were not thinking that we were writing history. But people loved it because so many ideas are concentrated in that badge.

'Still now, when we present the car it's not necessary to explain what a GTI is; what the badge means. People understand what the car will be. It is performance. It is roadholding. It is youth. We made the first one 40 years ago. My girlfriend is now my wife. But we have stayed young for 40 years.' car

PEUGEOT E-208 GTI

PRICE £40,000 (est)
POWERTRAIN 54kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 276bhp, 254lb ft, 5.7sec 0-62mph, 112mph
WEIGHT 1596kg
EFFICIENCY 4.0 miles per kWh, 217-mile range (official), 0g/km CO2
ON SALE 2026

GTI
PEUGEOT
PEUGEOT SPORT

FANTASTIC

BEASTS

With legislation threatening their very existence, Aston Martin, Ferrari and Lamborghini have another roll of the V12 dice

Words Ben Barry
Photography Jordan Butters

GX 247AJ

Two ways to make the Aston look even more elegant

A test of three V12 supercars is clearly not comparable to an RAF low-flying exercise, but it does share three core requirements: we need an inordinate amount of fuel, a lot of space and preferably not so many people around to complain about a howling racket that rattles windows for miles around (although to you and me it's a 12-cylinder symphony).

So we point the Lamborghini Revuelto, Ferrari 12Cilindri and Aston Martin Vanquish north, striding up the A1, aiming to re-fuel in Barnard Castle and vanish from the radar in the North Pennines.

Disappearing is easier said than done, because even with the volume off this trio would pull a crowd – the hybrid Revuelto later proves as much, as it glides through town on electric power and startled pedestrians grab smartphones from pockets like guns from holsters. And when all three of these end-of-days V12s are singing through an arsenal of exhausts, it's a social-media feeding frenzy.

Beyond the visuals and the sounds, more fascinating are the radically different spins these three put on their respective V12 engines – where they place it, how (and whether) they boost it and the means by which they transmit its spectacular power output to the road.

We're here to discover how that makes them feel to drive.

A 250 GTO for the modern era, the Ferrari 12Cilindri takes Enzo's mantra that clients bought an engine with a car thrown in free, then turns it into the most literal nomenclature since Maserati got stumped naming a saloon with four doors.

Then again, this engine has done so much good work it should probably have a piazza named after it. Six-point-five litres of naturally aspirated heaven descended from the Enzo, it rips to 9250rpm and makes 819bhp all in.

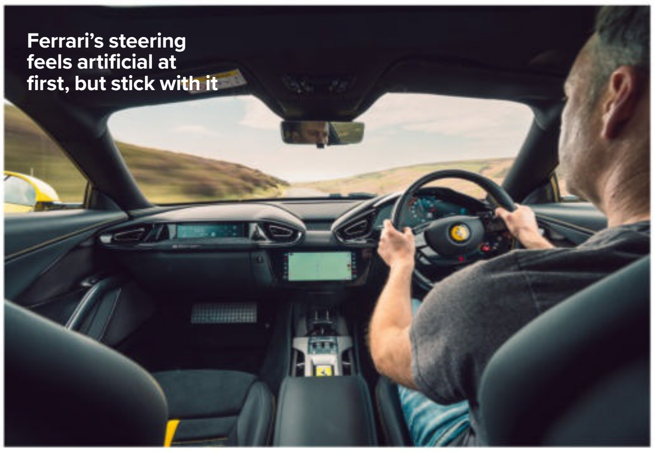
More than just an engine on wheels, though, the 12Cilindri gets rear steering (with individually actuated wheels) and updated chassis electronics such as six-way dynamic chassis control and Side-Slip Angle Control. An evolutionary step over the 812 Superfast it might be, but it's quite different in feel.

The Lamborghini Revuelto is a more definitive leap over its Aventador predecessor. The roofline is fully 13cm lower than the Aston or Ferrari's and you still sit in the point of the arrow, pedals dramatically offset by wheelarch intrusion, but an all-new carbonfibre tub is 25 per cent stiffer, the previous pushrod suspension is swapped for less exotic double wishbones, and a dual-clutch gearbox now sits in the normal place for a mid-engined car (the rear) and is transversely packaged.

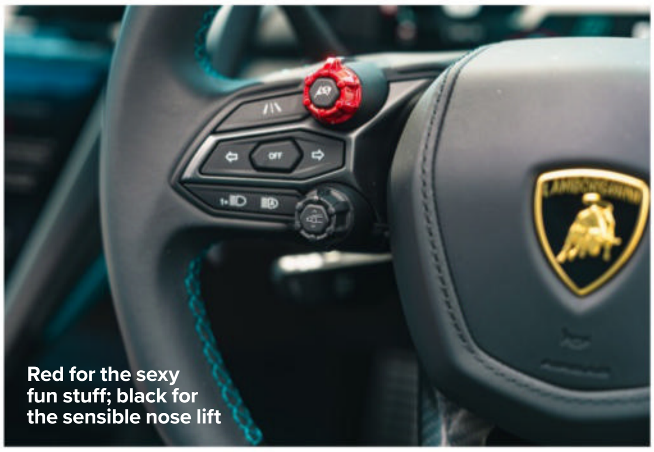
Crucially, the Revuelto is Lamborghini's first series-production hybrid. Its new V12 shares the dimensions and 60° vee of its predecessor, but it's engineered from scratch, revs 800rpm higher at 9500rpm, and is now boosted by an e-motor integrated into its gearbox and two more to drive the front wheels. (The tiny 3.8kWh lithium-ion battery also helps reduce CO_2 and provides up to six miles of pure electric running.)

It's good for 1001bhp, 217mph and 0-62mph in 2.5sec.

When I slip away near-silently from a gravel car park in the ▶



Ferrari's steering feels artificial at first, but stick with it



Red for the sexy fun stuff; black for the sensible nose lift

Pennines, the geological shrapnel is amplified on the carbon chassis, the calm abruptly shattered when the V12 fires with a deeper, more startling sort of guard-dog growl than the earlier V12s.

It gnashes mechanically, yelps manically if you summon the nerve to wind it right out and hauls so instantly – and with such free-spinning linearity – you wonder if the needle won't bend all the way round the dial.

Rather than dilution, Lambo's first series-production hybrid adds explosivity to its V12, not to mention the futurism to match designs that've riffed on UFOs since the days of the Countach.

The Aston Martin is a very different kettle of fish, in its more traditional specification and in the way it drives. Like the previous DBS Superleggera, there's a bonded aluminium structure with a turbocharged 5.2-litre V12 nuzzled far back in the nose and an eight-speed ZF torque converter located in the rear, sending power to the back wheels alone.

There's more fresh air between Vanquish and DB12 than there was between their predecessors, the DBS Superleggera and DB11 – partly by taking away from the new DB12 (now, erm, only a V8), but also adding to the Vanquish, notably 80mm extra between the A-pillar and front wheels. That shifts the V12 almost behind the front axle and means you no longer get plus-two rear seats. There's bracing all over the shop, beefier undertrays, isolation removed from the steering column, new Bilstein DTX dampers, and a new e-diff too – a first for an Aston V12.

I drive the Aston from home to meet the others, biding my time on the two-lane A1 before it inexplicably opens to three as population density thins beyond the M62 – a double whammy of thinly traffic'd, triple-laned temptation. The Aston explodes forward, an 824bhp twin-turbocharged instant driving ban of thrust.

Against Italians that perk up instantly and rev past nine grand, the Aston is a little lethargic below 3000rpm and underwhelms on paper with its 6500rpm peak, but throttle response is precise (a new Boost Reserve function helps reduce lag) and the performance window feels far wider, partly because the gearing is so long and acceleration builds so dramatically as those turbos windmill up.

On the A1 the Aston feels majestic – rock solid, awesomely refined with its double-glazed glass and smooth gearshifts, plush as you like. The gearing is so tall it's almost in reverse – settle at 90mph in eighth gear and you'd barely be ticking over at 1900rpm or so.

In GT mode the rich sophistication of the V12 melts into the background. Select Sport and the car feels and sounds more potent, a brooding force that builds and rolls like an ocean swell.

Plus the cabin's lovely (if not that different from a Vantage), the seats the most comfortable on test, and there's a fantastic open feel to the glasshouse helped no end by a standard panoramic roof.

When we park up in Barnard Castle and draw a crowd, a straw poll puts the Aston's carbonfibre bodywork top of the pile. It's certainly a gorgeous car, more cohesive in the flesh than in some photos.

After overnighting at the Red Well – perfect if you've overstretched your budget by choosing a £300k-plus supercar – I get my first stint in the Ferrari, tossing my bag into its generous boot, then settling down into its firm sports seats. It's a nicely built, designed and driver-focused cabin, but I do get lost with its hidden-until-lit controls and unintuitive infotainment.

No other front-engined car drives anything like this. Some 214 kilos lighter than its Gaydon rival at 1560kg dry, the Ferrari feels at least that much fleeter on the road, less substantial, less refined (no double-glazed glass here) and with a power delivery that trades torquey muscle for revs and gears that come at you like a tennis balls from those automatic training machines – the 12Cilindri final drive is taller than the previous 812 Superfast, but an extra gear ratio essentially neutralises the difference.

The Ferrari also rides beautifully, with a lovely fusion of stiff springs, ample roll support and elastic damping to take the sting out of bumps. The Aston's damping feels more compliant still at times, but the Ferrari copes better across the board. Any speed, any surface, it's just brilliant.

As fluids start to warm and we climb up and out of Barnard Castle, the patchwork of green fields and dry-stone walls bleeds into the ▶

THE ASTON EXPLODES FORWARD, AN 824BHP TWIN-TURBO INSTANT DRIVING BAN OF THRUST

Brake by wire gives 12Cilindri power and consistency

ASTON MARTIN
V12 AML

V12 GT familiar turf for Ferrari; Lambo takes more leaps

ASTON MARTIN
V12 AML
UK

Always loud Aston meets usually loud hybrid Lambo

wilder landscape of the Pennines. Houses, traffic and junctions all but disappear, leaving just faded snowpoles lined like birthday candles into the distance and a road that opens from tighter knots to more indulgent sweeps as the vista unfurls.

I start to lean harder on the Ferrari's chassis, looking for feedback but initially finding it a little perplexing and hard to trust. Synthetic, super-quick steering offers little feel, and the Ferrari is very obviously four-wheel steer in the way it virtually shortens its wheelbase. It all just feels a little too fingertippy and nervous on first acquaintance.

Its glorious V12 is also oddly neutered, especially inside – while the 812 Superfast would yelp and *waap, waaaap* its way round to 9000rpm, the 12Cilindri has a more filtered, more refined soundtrack. It still intoxicates with its bassier low-rpm throat-clearing and the full trombone as you home in on peak power, but I'd crank the volume if I could.

Pull a long, slender paddle fixed to the column and gears engage in the super-snappy Ferrari tradition, accompanied by a kind of slashing air noise, like I'm whipping the donkey with every shift.

Seat-time builds trust in the Ferrari's hyper-sensitive chassis. The steering has a lovely oily consistency to perfectly replicate the resistance of hydraulic fluid, and the brake-by-wire pedal filters out surface noise to deliver an awesomely consistent feel.

It takes a while, but as I work the Ferrari's chassis harder, so I begin to trust it has mechanical bite to live with its hyper agility – the nose sweeps in confidently, the rear follows all of a piece, and I can still lay into the chassis and power hard. Peak torque of a relatively modest 500lb ft at 7250rpm helps too – you're pushing progressively against the grip where the Aston (738lb ft from 2500rpm) just lights 'em up, and there's always plenty of headroom to explore further.

Compared with the previous 812 Superfast, the 12Cilindri's yaw centre feels further forward, and its chassis doesn't straighten quite so aggressively should you bend it out of line. It's the less aggressive, more fluid of the two – if still very much a digital experience.

Up here, the analogue Aston reveals its dynamic character more readily. There's a thick-set heft to its 50-yard handshake – the damping is noticeably tenser at urban speeds than the DBS Superleggera, even in its softest GT setting, matched to steering that's meaty around the straight-ahead, eager if far from nervous immediately off it, and with better road communication than the Ferrari.

AS I WORK THE FERRARI HARDER I BEGIN TO TRUST IT HAS MECHANICAL BITE TO LIVE WITH ITS AGILITY

A couple of surfaces in the Pennines ruffle the Aston, where it refuses to compromise body control and becomes a little too reactive as a result, but typically it settles into a gorgeous cadence at speed. Rear compliance is particularly impressive, helping the chassis compress over its fat 325-section rear tyres and find some kind of purchase – though it is always chewing at them like a dog at a bone if you push hard, and variable traction control seems more cautious than in the Vantage, even in its liberal modes.

The Aston never shakes the feel of a heavy, brutish sort of car, but the new e-diff does gift it some welcome agility – it can turn in really quite freely before hooking up on power mid-corner for a lovely slingshot out of the turn. It's huge fun to hustle, especially as it has such charisma.

I head off in the Lamborghini on a route that writhes downhill like those multi-lane sack slides at the funfair – well sighted, fast and flowing, but laced with corrugated ripples and undulations from ▶

the peaty landscape, it's a proper challenge.

The Lambo is absurdly good here. Forgiving and supple in Strada mode, it practically floats over the terrain, the sensation dialled up by exceptional forward visibility from its steeply raked windscreen and low scuttle, and the almost gymnastic freedom with which the Revuelto pivots into a corner.

The stats back up what your internal g-sensor is already telling you – the Lambo puts less weight over its front axle than its front-mid-engined rivals (44 per cent versus 48 per cent for the Ferrari and 51 per cent for the Aston) but the difference seems greater from behind the wheel – the Revuelto's front end is gorgeously feathery.

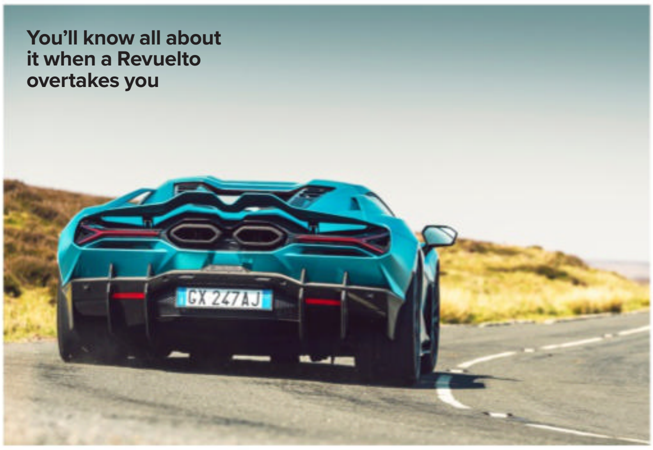
More surprising, perhaps, is that for all the bewildering complexity beneath – hybrid torque-vectoring, rear-wheel steering, regen brakes – the Revuelto is an astonishingly intuitive car to hustle. The steering is key. Fast but with a fixed ratio, it's direct, light and, while not rich in feel, never loads up stickily under the pull of e-motor torque. The brakes, despite juggling regen and hydraulics, also feel totally natural.

But it's the chassis calibration that makes the biggest leap over the Aventador. The rear-wheel steering is neatly integrated – present enough to be tangible, subtle enough to feel natural – while the e-motors seamlessly introduce negative or positive torque to help the chassis bite and rotate. This is a much longer, heavier car than the Aventador, yet it somehow feels lighter and keener to pivot around you, its balance easier to manipulate. That its 1772kg dry weight is a dead heat with the much heavier-feeling Aston just beggars belief. Only low-speed cornering leaves a nagging doubt – it's perhaps overly keen to turn – but in almost all other ways it's mind-blowing good.

On a quick road like this, where maintaining rhythm is everything, it's so satisfying I can't quite believe it.

Like an 819bhp tortoise retreating into its shell

Unlike Aston's V8s, the V12 is born and bred in Britain



You'll know all about it when a Revuelto overtakes you

FOR ALL ITS BEWILDERING COMPLEXITY THE LAMBO IS AN ASTONISHINGLY INTUITIVE CAR TO HUSTLE

Its V12 still sounds gloriously complex, its induction gasps and fast-spinning internals now layered with background whizz from the e-motors, and there is, of course, an obscene amount of power. Even dialled back from the 1001bhp to just the 873bhp or 895bhp offered by Strada or Sport, the Revuelto is still a good 100bhp or so more potent than the thrustiest Aventadors.

But the standout is how this engine takes the torque-lite urgency of natural aspiration, thickens it up at the bottom end then squires helium into its induction plenums near the top. It's fully alive from the second you introduce power to the moment you streak past 9000rpm, and still with that linearity that makes atmospheric motors so satisfying to wring out.

Combined with all-wheel drive and gearshifts that are slicker and less disruptive to balance than before, the Revuelto harnesses its four-figure output like it's strapped to a dyno – always rear-biased and ready to spit a little sideways if you're aggressive, but soon summoning the purchase from its engine-driven rear axle and e-motor-powered front to bolt down the road. Crazy as it sounds, it feels fit to take a load more power.

Unquestionably, some of the Aventador's grisly, macho mechanical feel has been traded; a bit more attitude in the Revuelto's Corsa gearshifts would be welcome. But I think the Revuelto does an admirable job of bottling the essence of flagship Lambo in a package that's both immersively exciting and more sensible too – it certainly aces my return run down the A1.

A few years ago Lambo's now retired tech boss Maurizio Reggiani assuaged my concerns about hybridisation, saying 'we're working to ensure we have a Lamborghini – to be a hybrid but have the same emotion we have today'. True to his word, I'd say.

We grab fish and chips in the sun in Barnard Castle and leave the cars parked up like a honey trap. Locals pore over all three, absolutely delighted to see them, even those who aren't experts knowing they're in the presence of greatness.

You can get just as much power out of other engines – not to mention obliterate them with electric hypercars – and today the V12 is under pressure from regulations like never before. Yet as supply tightens, so this formidable layout seems more vital than ever before.

Nothing does automotive theatre quite like a V12 can, and two epic days behind the wheel of three very different V12 supercars only underlines that fact. This is not the first time we've said it, and we hope it's not the last: let's enjoy them while we still can.

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

PRICE £467,000
POWERTRAIN 6498cc 48v V12 plus 3.8kWh battery and three e-motors, eight-speed dual-clutch auto, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 1001bhp @ 9250rpm, 535lb ft @ 6750rpm (ICE only), 2.5sec 0-62mph, 217mph
WEIGHT 1772kg (dry)
EFFICIENCY 23.8mpg (claimed), 11.4mpg (tested), 276g/km CO2
ON SALE Now

FERRARI 12CILINDRI

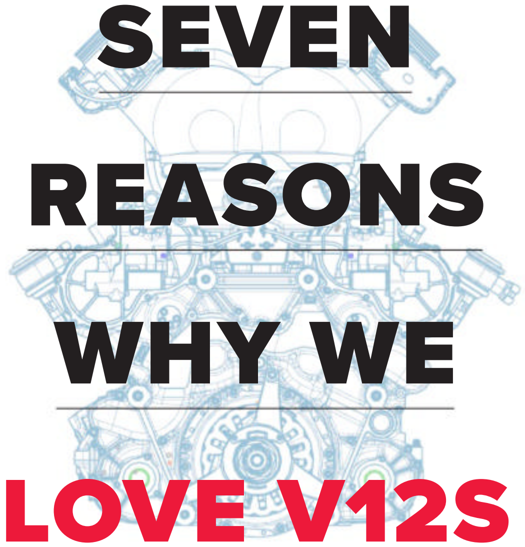
PRICE £339,245
POWERTRAIN 6496cc 48v V12, eight-speed dual-clutch automatic, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 819bhp @ 9250rpm, 500lb ft @ 7250rpm, 2.9sec 0-62mph, 211mph
WEIGHT 1560kg (dry)
EFFICIENCY 18.7mpg (claimed), 10.8mpg (tested), 329g/km CO2
ON SALE Now

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

PRICE £330,000
POWERTRAIN 5204cc twin-turbocharged 48v V12, eight-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 824bhp @ 6500rpm, 738lb ft @ 2500rpm, 3.3sec 0-62mph, 214mph
WEIGHT 1774kg (dry)
EFFICIENCY 20.7mpg (claimed), 15.2mpg (tested), 312g/km CO2
ON SALE Now

WATCH THE VIDEO!
GET *CAR'S* DIGITAL EDITION – SEE PAGE 80

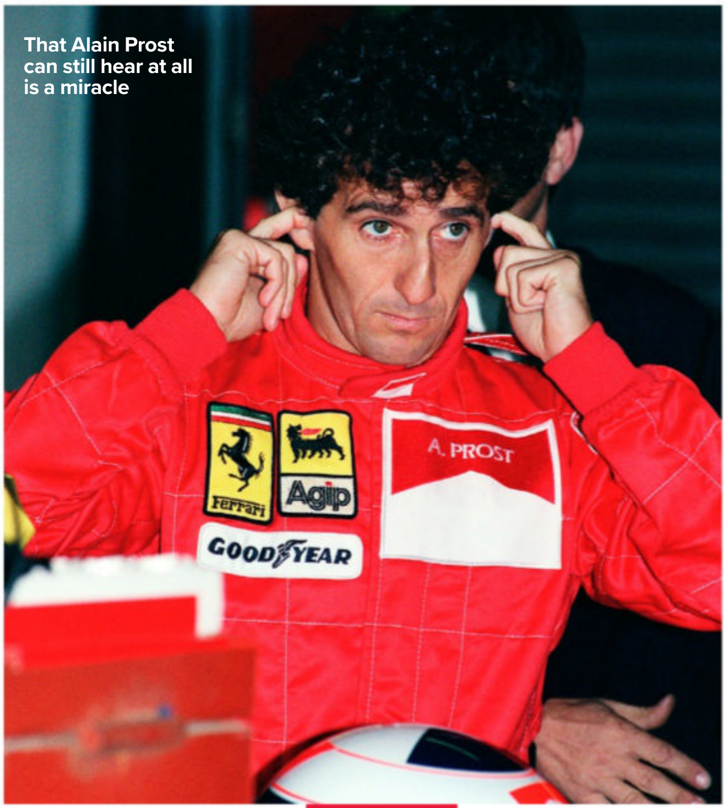
V12s are mighty on mountain roads, and smooth, responsive and characterful everywhere



SEVEN REASONS WHY WE LOVE V12S

The combustion engine at its most awe-inspiring. What's not to like?

Photography Olgun Kordal, Alex Howe, Barry Hayden, Getty & Cosworth



That Alain Prost can still hear at all is a miracle

1

They can do the dull stuff too

V12s are elite, no doubt. Even within the rarefied world of Ferrari ownership there are tiers, and right at the top (literally – the cars are built in a different space, up on the first floor) sit the V12s. Of the very lucky few who own them, how many do we think use them regularly? A handful? Benedetto Vigna told me he clocked up thousands of kilometres in his Purosangue last year, but then he is the CEO of Ferrari. Me? I'm not the CEO of Ferrari, but I did get to spend five days in another Purosangue, driving to the northern fringes of the Sahara. And having done so I can confirm that, while they're undoubtedly superb for a quick thrash, the majesty of a big-capacity, turbo-free V12 really makes itself felt over time and distance, on normal roads as well as extraordinary ones. With its high-fidelity throttle response (you can dial up exactly, say, 5825rpm, plus or minus 10rpm, on demand) and glassy smoothness, the Purosangue's 6.5-litre V12 was faultless and charismatic in rush-hour Marrakesh. And out in open country, its rampant speed and heart-swelling musicality made every mile a privilege.

Ben Miller

2

In the '90s they defined an era

The McLaren F1 was so good, and so demonstrably better than any supercar of its day, that it arguably still defines the modern hypercar. It was much faster than a 'normal' supercar, more exclusive, more wow and hyper expensive – yet with serious investment potential. The F1's impact was profound, and still is. Its effect on me was also profound. I first drove one on winding south Welsh roads 31 years ago. Suddenly, all contemporary supercars felt overweight and underpowered. They felt sloppy, unresponsive. Never in the world of high-performance cars has one machine so magnificently and emphatically raised the bar. There was much that was unique about the F1, from its central driving position to its carbon tub. But the most important component was that bespoke BMW engine – with 6.1 litres and 627bhp, it was the greatest V12 of its day.

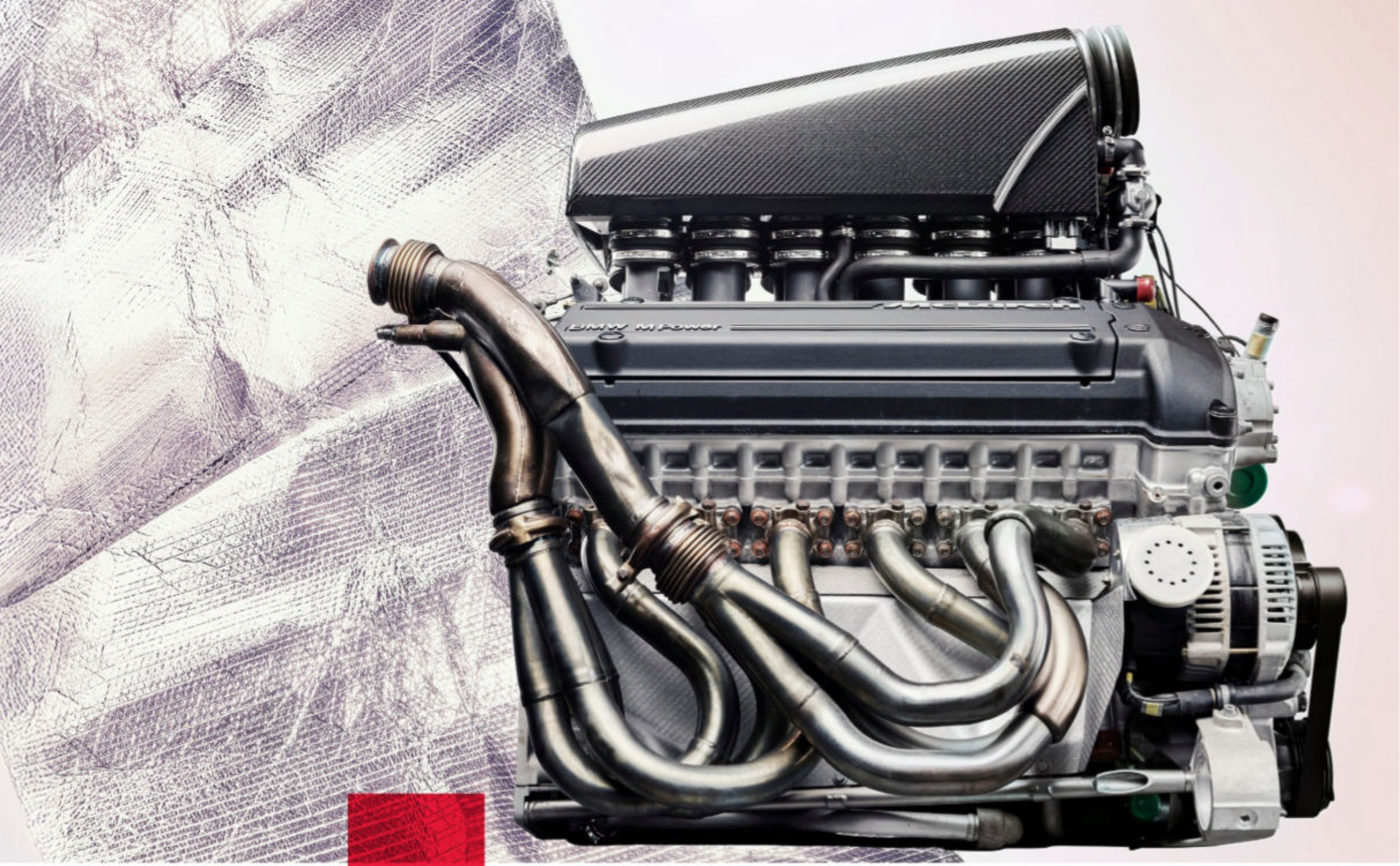
Gavin Green

3

Sonically, they're exquisite

There is no greater sound than a V12 at full chat. Organic, terrifying, straining – they're both smooth and stretched, somehow managing to sound like they're in sync and tearing themselves apart at the same time. Some stick in my mind more than others. The Pagani Zonda was a screamer and remains a high-water mark for the company. More recently, barely a Goodwood event goes by without a million Instagram reels of the GMA T.50 and its Cosworth V12. But my personal highlight goes back to 1991 and the British Grand Prix. F1-mad, my dad had grandstand tickets on the outside of the old Luffield. The location was critical – we could see the cars sweep into Bridge, then climb hard on the brakes for Priory and into Luffield. The anticipation built as the scarlet Ferraris of Prost and Alesi swung through the corners, balanced throttle not yet unleashing the 14,000rpm V12. And then, with apex hit, the full force of the 3.5-litre V12 came at us – the exhausts were pointed directly at us – as it fired itself up the next straight. I've never experienced anything so simultaneously painful and glorious.

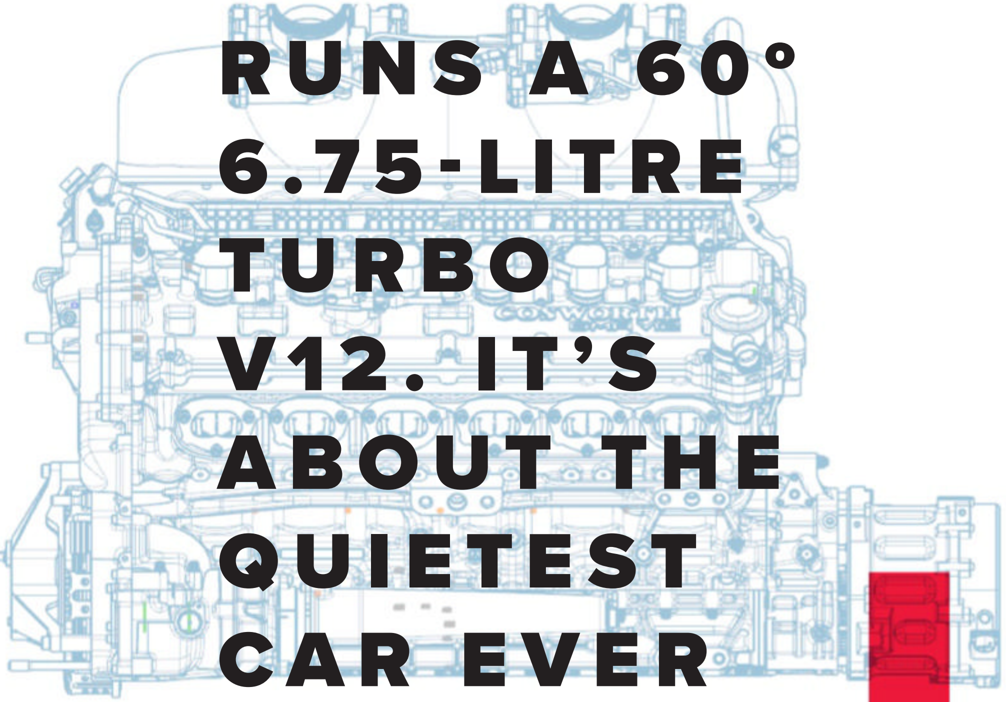
Piers Ward



④

They make a great diesel…

As a twenty-something arriving in this job as the EV takeover was gaining momentum, I had a real fear I'd never drive a V12; a damning indictment of where we find ourselves. And then salvation arrived in the unlikeliest of forms: a huge SUV packing a V12… diesel. Born in the mid-2000s out of a need to find a link, however tenuous, between Audi's Le Mans-winning race cars and its road cars, the Q7 V12 TDI hails from a time when diesel was interesting and marketable and the move to it was acquiring an inexorable momentum. Even so, this was a wild idea, not least because the Q7 was the only car to get this 6.0-litre engine – imagine the engineers justifying that cost line in a board meeting… Thank God they did. Modern performance SUVs would eat it for breakfast but I'll never forget the surge as that 738lb ft of torque, available from just 1700rpm, was unleashed on an A1 slip road, sending 2.6 tonnes of unassuming brown SUV towards the horizon at an astonishing rate. I'm not sure who was more surprised, me or the 3-series tailing my bumper just moments beforehand.
Ted Welford



THE ROLLS PHANTOM RUNS A 60° 6.75-LITRE TURBO V12. IT'S ABOUT THE QUIETEST CAR EVER

The BMW V12 at the heart of the McLaren F1

5

They're beautiful to look at

In a roll call of the world's most beautiful engines, not all are V12s. I could cite Alfa V6s, perhaps a BMW M six, and some older American V8s, stripped of clutter. Yet the finest V12s really are artistic masterpieces. Older Ferrari Colombo V12s were exquisite, with their (often red) crackle-finish cam covers and six twin-barrel Webers pointing skyward, ingesting air and trumpeting music. The Miura V12 had its large and very beautiful V12 shoehorned sideways, just behind the dainty cockpit – proudly on view in the rear mirror. You could hear the engine and you could see it. Like most V12s, it occupied every square inch of space. So gorgeous is the V12 engine that the engine bay is often designed not merely to accommodate it but to show it off, like a display case. The McLaren F1's engine bay was pure theatre, lined as it was with heat-reflecting gold foil. And the GMA T.50 V12 has no unsightly belts, chains or plastic engine covers. A V12 is invariably the focal point of any car. It is the car's heart and soul. And when an engineer spends so much time on their masterpiece, they want the world to see it.
Gavin Green

6

They can do silky

It's wrong to think the V12 only works in supercars, being driven like there's no tomorrow. The sheer rightness of the engine's fundamental layout means it's also capable of remarkable restraint. With a three-piston power phase effortlessly balancing all the movements, the V12 can ooze low-down torque and relax into the tarmac with barely a whisper. The type can do sumptuous as effortlessly as it can speed, and it's been that way forever. V12s powered limos like the Packard Twelve and planes like the Sunbeam Mohawk, where its smoothness meant power without the kind of vibrations that might shake the frame to pieces. Look at Rolls-Royce's engines. The Phantom runs a 6.75-litre turbo V12 with a 60° vee angle and it's about the quietest car ever. Some of that comes from the insulation and noise-cancelling Rolls also employs, but that silky engine skims along with barely a murmur. There are louder libraries. Even when you call on its performance, depressing the accelerator feels like dipping your toes into liquid gold.
Piers Ward

7

They continue to inspire

A V12 in isolation is thrilling enough, but the experience can gain an extra dimension when it's shared. Just read *Convoy!* from our February 1977 issue. Mel Nichols and his companions, driving a V12-engined Countach and two other Lamborghinis from Modena to London, enjoyed the unforgettable camaraderie of an unnatural concentration of wonderful cars driven by kindred spirits. 'Those three cars tore down through the bends, and not for any contest but simply for the delight of seeing how flatly and tidily the three gold beasts obeyed their drivers' commands,' wrote Nichols. At one point he's in the Countach and encounters an enthusiastically driven Jaguar XJS. 'Precisely as the Jaguar came alongside we had matched its speed at 155mph. We were in top again now, the throttle still open, and we left the XJS as if it were standing still… Even at that speed a Countach is stuck down solid as a rock, never twitching from its path while behind your head is this increasingly ferocious noise: the V12 in full cry.'
Colin Overland

A treat for your ears and – in the mirror – your eyes, too

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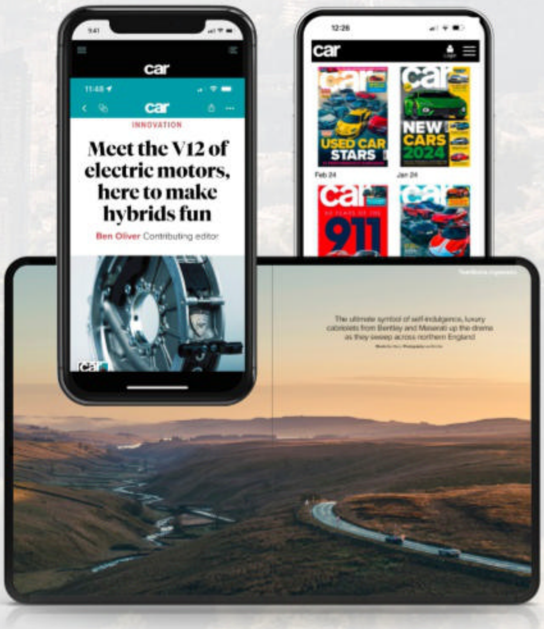
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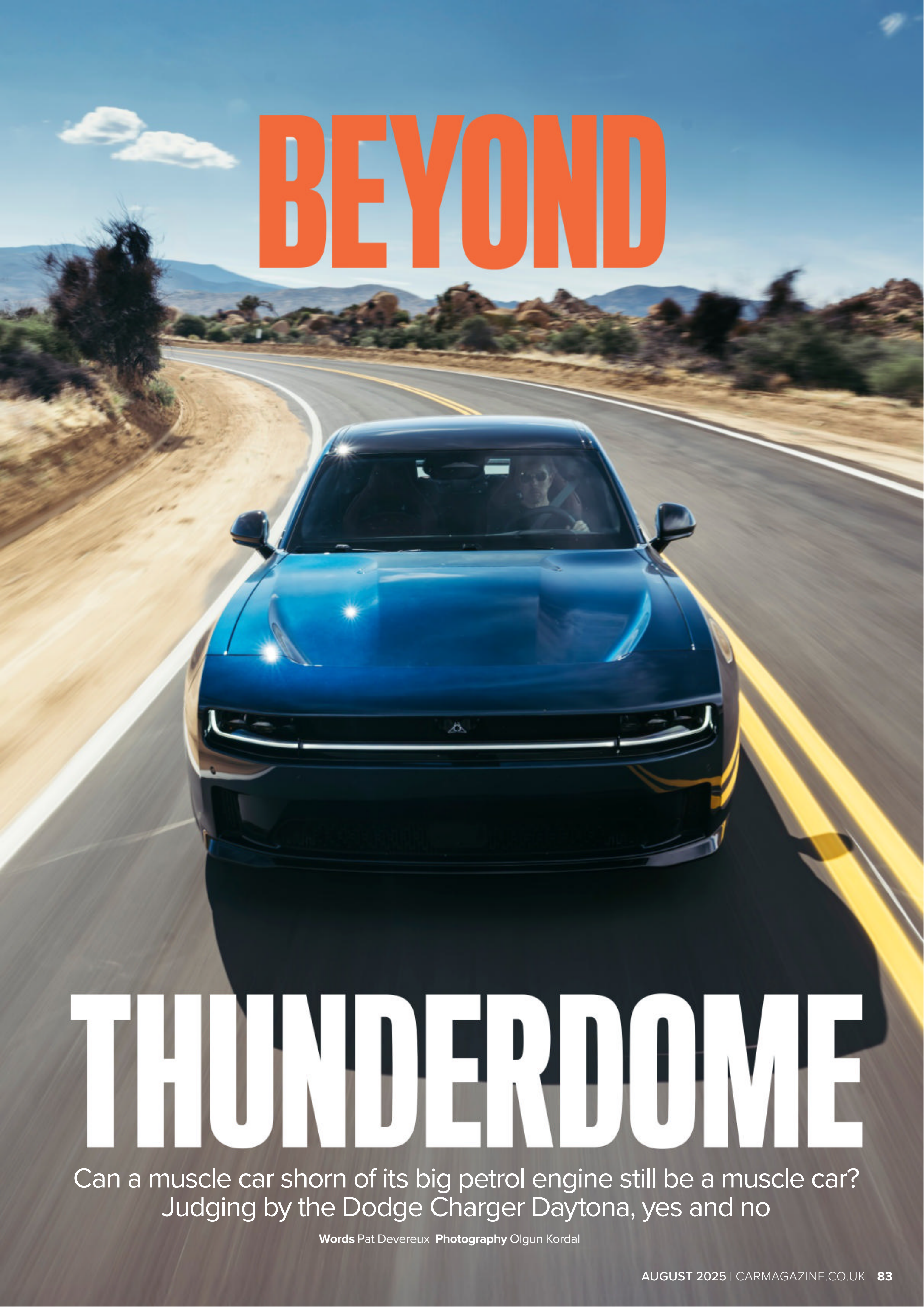

BEYOND THUNDERDOME

Can a muscle car shorn of its big petrol engine still be a muscle car? Judging by the Dodge Charger Daytona, yes and no

Words Pat Devereux **Photography** Olgun Kordal

Coyote name was used by rival Fords

Two-door for now, but four-door is coming

It's just after dawn on a picture perfect morning in downtown Palm Springs. All hazy warm sunshine reflecting off the mid-century architecture, dew drying on the pavement, the smell of coffee wafting down the main drag on the gentle easterly breeze. It's hard to imagine a better place to be at this time of year.

However the SPF50-slathered silver-surfer locals, out for their morning power walks fuelled by prunes and protein shakes, are visibly unhappy. Maybe shocked is a better word. One minute they were striding purposefully down the street listening to the distant morning birdsong. Now they have been subjected to the aural version of a high-powered cattle prod.

The cause of this neck-snapping chiropractic bonanza is the battery-powered Dodge Charger – the Daytona Scat Pack, to be precise – sitting in the car park. The specific culprit is the Fratzonic fake exhaust sound, which wakes up with as much subtlety as a Fourth of July firework display. It's not just loud in a whip-crack Jaguar F-Type start-up way. Think original Adam West Batmobile start-up. But louder.

You might well ask what Fratzonic means – it alludes to the Dodge badge, named Fratzog for no good reason by a designer in the '60s – but perhaps the bigger question is: what in the hell is Dodge, the original bad-boy US muscle-car brand, doing building an electric anything, never mind one of its rowdy, storied, *Bullitt*-famous name plates? It's like Don Julio draining the alcohol from its tequila or Marlboro making nicotine-free cigarettes.

The notion has caused a big stir among the traditionalists, some of whom are threatening to desert the brand completely. And they mean it. It's got so bad Dodge has already pulled the entry-spec R/T version of the Charger Daytona from the range after a near-complete inability to get anyone to buy or even lease one.

Dodge is blaming the Trump tariffs – Chargers are built in neighbouring Canada, so (at the time of writing) they're subject to 25 per cent tax hikes. But the reality is they're superglued to the showroom floors for other reasons. Thanks to a unique distribution system, no one prices reality into their cars like US dealers. If they have a hot model, they'll charge you way over MSRP to take it home. But equally, if they feel they're sitting on a lemon, there isn't a number they'll refuse. There are several on sale right now with more than $25k off the asking price.

So is this Dodge's Bud Light moment? Has it just committed commercial suicide? It seems to make no sense. But I want to give ▶

Rancho Super CAR WASH
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Big on the outside, not so big inside

IONEERTOWN MOTEL

Wheelspin not the Daytona's main strength

Bonnet-top wing a nod to heritage

No fumes to spoil that pristine paintwork

Cabin's look and feel stick to tradition

Dodge the benefit of the doubt – after all I own two of its cars (both of them Dodge Demons – the fastest, most absurd, wheelie-pulling Challenger ever made; one with 840bhp and the other the other is the run-out, last-chance-for-gas 2024 model that has more than 1025bhp and is so mean it can make your lawn die just by looking at it). I'm a big Dodge fan, so therefore I'm technically the exact audience for this newfangled Charger Daytona.

Where do we start? How about: what constitutes a true muscle car? Even though there are inevitably arguments about the very first usage of the term, dating back to the late 1940s, the car that popularised the phrase was the Pontiac GTO.

It launched in 1964 into a post-war US buzzing with car culture, when petrol was cheap and performance was paramount. It caught the zeitgeist so well that Ford, Chevrolet, Plymouth and, yes, Dodge quickly followed suit. The formula was simple: American-made mid-sized saloons with oversized powerful engines. They prioritised power over luxury or handling, offering accessible performance for everyman.

It's a simple formula, and one that doesn't necessarily require a particular type of fuel. Bearing that in mind, I have a leftfield take for you. There is another brand offering exactly that mix of US-built cheap power and performance with luxury-free functionality today. But it's not the Detroit Big Three. It's Tesla.

A Model 3 – especially the Performance model – and even a secondhand Model S can be seen as early 21st century muscle cars. Both are absurdly cheap for the power and performance they offer. They could hardly be called luxurious. The handling isn't the most engaging. They are not terribly well made. So maybe electric muscle cars are already a thing; we just haven't recognised it.

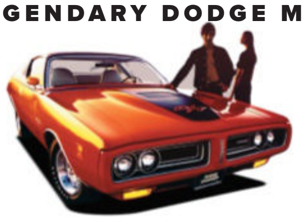
It's with that thought rattling around in my mind that I have my first proper look at the Charger Daytona sitting there broadcasting its soothingly pleasant sci-fi pulse, vibrating gently at what we'd traditionally call tickover. Even in dark blue it's visually arresting, with all sorts of angles and details that shout Dodge DNA, but it doesn't overtly borrow from the past.

Well, not directly. One of the key standout features is the trademark 'R-Wing' on the bonnet of all Charger Daytonas, which is a nod to the original NASCAR-winning Charger Daytona that was fitted with a comically vast, eat-your-lunch-off-it rear aerofoil. Just to be clear, all electric Charger models are called Daytonas; the later straight-six – and the possible V8 – petrol-powered models will just be badged Chargers. Those will not get the R-Wing.

Open up the bonnet and you'll see why. Dodge will need all the space it can get to make the lid close on a proper petrol engine and associated technical gubbins. As it is, there is a small, fairly useless space which ▶

THREE LEGENDARY DODGE MUSCLE CARS

1968 Charger R/T
An all-time great. Also known as 'the other car' in the *Bullitt* chase through San Francisco. A 1970 version was Dominic Toretto's ride in the *Fast & Furious* franchise.



1970 Challenger R/T
The simple, and increasingly battered, Challenger became a symbol of raw freedom in *Vanishing Point*. Such a shame the film didn't exactly end well for the car.

2018 Challenger SRT Demon
The first production car to pull wheelies and do a sub 10-second quarter-mile time in stock showroom condition. Peak Dodge muscle car.

Is EV the muscle car's meteor strike?

frankly no one is going to use in reality. Such are the compromises of multi-model platform strategies.

The platform in the Charger's case is STLA-L. Slated to underpin everything from Dodges to Maseratis to Ram trucks, the only other car on sale that currently uses it in a similar form is the electric Jeep Wagoneer S. While this might not bode well for the Charger's saloon sophistication, let's not forget that my two beloved Demons sit on the Chrysler LA platform that is a derivative of the LX platform that dates back to the 20th century. They work just fine, for muscle cars.

So that's nothing to get upset about. Neither is the power available from the twin 335bhp motors – one front, one rear. With 670bhp and 627lb ft available from zero mph, even the Charger Daytona's elephantine kerbweight isn't enough to dull the performance as we waft out of Palm Springs, through Palm Desert then jet up into the mountains on Highway 74. A 0-60mph time of 3.3 seconds and a quarter-mile in the low elevens is bang on the muscle-car money.

But the ride isn't. It's much better. The Charger Daytona scythes up through the succession of switchbacks in a quiet, stable and controlled way that is in a different universe from the previous-gen cars. I acknowledge this test car is fitted with the optional Track pack with its active dampers and the impressive Goodyear Eagle F1 SuperCar 3 tyres. But it's properly GT-style smooth.

As we reach the upper mountain, the terrain changes and becomes faster, more open, the air temp drops 10°C, and the trees turn from palms to pines. Time to look for a ten-tenths performance mode in the Charger's menu. In Sport the handling has been assured and predictable, if a little killjoy. As an all-wheel-drive car – the front motor goes to sleep when it's not needed – it has major understeer unless you really provoke it. And that, we note as the road tightens again, is not strictly advisable.

Race mode is a theatrical, *Ready Player One*-style audio-visual fantasia that conjures up a dirty electro V8 soundtrack and gives the Charger the reactions of a three-tonne preying mantis. A couple of spirited passes through some precipitous bends make it quite clear this is not the car's preferred mode/location combo unless we intend to end the session with a flying lesson or welded into the rock face.

That's exactly what you'd expect of a Dodge muscle car, but what comes as a bit of a surprise is its flat, computer-says-no refusal to do a burn-out. As mindless as it is, being able to fry your rear tyres in a cloud of smoke is Job One of any car with a Charger or Challenger badge.

Not having that on demand feels strange. UnAmerican. Like something's broken. It tries to make it up to you with Donut mode and Drift mode, shutting down the front motor and letting you hang the back out on the throttle once you're moving. But it still feels wrong, like something's missing.

And we have plenty of time to ponder that as our trip is paused while we search for a charger for our Charger. Unlike most of the major brands, Dodge has yet to strike a deal with Tesla to use its US network – a game changer for any electric vehicle – so we have to get in line behind the flocks of VW IDs and Hyundai Ioniq 5s. While we are static, we have a good poke around the interior.

Our test car has the optional carbon and suede interior spec – along with pretty much every other optional pack available – which adds flashes of colour and the black weave to various surfaces. But it's the proportions that are the most interesting to us. The car is more than five metres long and in excess of two metres wide, but the cabin is surprisingly high, and space, particularly in the rear seats, quite meagre.

One of the USPs of the previous-gen Challenger and Charger is their ability to seat four Big Gulp-swigging, In-N-Out burger-eating humans in all-round comfort as the driver terrorises them with the car's performance. This Charger Daytona changes that – it's great in the high-set chairs in the front. But it's a proper slo-mo squeeze, with arms and legs at odd angles, to get someone in the back.

This is largely due to this Charger Daytona being a two-door. A four-door version joins the range later this year, which will make things easier – while also confusing and enraging the Dodge faithful even more. Let me explain. For anyone who doesn't know, since its launch in 1966 there have been seven generations of Dodge Charger. This one you're looking at is the eighth. Even though it has been through more wardrobe changes and plastic surgery than Madonna and Cher combined during those seven iterations, it remained a two-door car. ▶

At least one Dodge fan likes the EV

It’s quick, but the range isn’t great

V6 and maybe V8 will follow ill-starred EV

DODGE CHARGER DAYTONA

PRICE $86,460 (Scat Pack)
POWERTRAIN 93.4kWh battery, two e-motors, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 670bhp, 627lb ft, 3.3sec 0-60mph, 130mph
WEIGHT 2688kg
EFFICIENCY 2.78 miles per kWh, 260-mile range, 0g/km CO2
ON SALE Now, in US
★★★★☆

> IMAGINE A STEAK RESTAURANT GOING SOLELY VEGAN OVERNIGHT AND WONDERING WHY ITS CUSTOMERS HAVE GOT UPSET AND DISAPPEARED

Then, in 2006, towards the end of the appalling DaimlerChrysler years, something odd happened: the Charger was relaunched as a four-door only. Just pleased to have the badge back in the range, the Dodge faithful shrugged their shoulders and carried on. But then, in 2008, Dodge relaunched the long-dead Challenger name – initially used as a budget version of the Coronet – as a two door. That was odd, too.

Fast forward a decade and the Dodge brand re-found its mojo under Sergio Marchionne's FCA – successor to DaimlerChrysler, predecessor of Stellantis. Both Charger and Challenger got the supercharged Hellcat treatment and much more besides. But one thing remained clear: Charger is the four-door, Challenger the two-door model.

Join me now in the present day. The Challenger is again dead and buried. Yes, there are some airy words about maybe something later this decade. But we know: it's gone. In its place, doing double duty then, is the new Charger. This new Charger. And this new Charger alone.

That in and of itself is disappointing, but it's not the end of the world if the car that replaces it is great. It's what comes next that is mind melting.

When you've spent the past two decades building up The Brotherhood of Muscle and being at the core of the whole *Fast & Furious* franchise, surely you understand better than anyone that your customers want high-drama, high-value, high-performance cars. So that's what you'd serve up first, no?

Nope, you launch with an electric car costing twice as much as they are used to paying and expect them get on with it. Looked at like this, it's surprising there isn't even more bile online or burning effigies on the corporate lawn. Imagine a steak restaurant going solely vegan overnight and wondering why its customers have got upset and disappeared. You can see why dealers are treating them like yesterday's newspapers.

I know there are 500bhp-plus twin-turbo six-cylinder petrol-powered cars coming soon. And I'm sure they will be great. Really. This Charger has good bones and, weighing a tonne less, it should be a proper laugh. But it'll now be fighting a battle from day one because Dodge bet on red but the ball has settled on black.

Of course, the world looked like it was going all-electric when the Charger Daytona was conceived and its launch planned years ago. And, in that rose-tinted bubble, being the first proper electric muscle car – the Mustang Mach-E doesn't count – almost makes sense. Especially with all those millions of Tesla owners potentially looking for something more fun and interesting to trade up into.

But it was naive then to think Dodge could ditch one customer base and immediately gain another, and it's now being proven plain wrong every day. It's not a tragedy for Dodge; it'll get over it. But it is for us Dodge fans. Because perhaps the really shocking news is: this Charger Daytona is an excellent car. I would still be more than happy to line it up in the garage next to either of my Demons. Ideally, I'd like it to be the planned 800-volt electric Banshee model – the real headbanger of the Daytona range that may well have been delayed indefinitely now. Just to keep the insanity level high. But what I will probably do in this new Drill Baby Drill era is what the other Dodge faithful are doing – wait for Dodge's black ops to finish shoehorning the rumoured supercharged V8 Red Eye engine in there and get one of those instead.

It's not the clever or sensible thing to do. A bit like firing up your rowdy car in a sleepy desert town first thing in the morning. But, what the hell. Neither are real muscle cars. **car**

'I CAN GET FIRED. BUT AT KIA THERE'S AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE NEED TO EXPERIMENT'

Found yourself admiring Kias recently? Of course you have. It's the Karim Habib effect

Words Ben Miller **Photography** Olgun Kordal

The *Bosco Verticale*, or vertical forest, is a pair of Milanese skyscrapers wreathed in moss and lichen. At least, that's how they appear from a distance, like a corner of the city was abandoned decades ago and nature is claiming it back.

Get closer and you realise the greenery is shrubs and trees: more than 90 species, planted on steel-reinforced balconies, improving the air quality, turbocharging biodiversity, nurturing a cooler micro climate in Milan's searing summers and softening the occasionally monotonous geometry of the built environment.

The concept is exciting. But as Karim Habib and I gaze at one of the towers, I can't help but feel a little underwhelmed. 'I don't know. True living walls, well, they feel much more… living,' I suggest dumbly, keen to avoid coming across as unimpressed by what he might consider a triumph. 'This is more like… um…'

'A building with a lot of plants?' says Habib, deadpan.

Nailed it.

Thoughtful and endearingly honest, Kia's executive vice chairman and head of global design is engaging company. He also appears free of the vast ego his standing and achievements might have engendered. Instead Habib commands a room in a low-key way, his tone in conversation soft and warm like oven-fresh pastries. He's stylish, of course, but casually so, dressing not to impress or weaponise his fluency with form and colour, but simply because of course that jacket looks great with that jersey. He laughs readily but it's soft, like a breeze through 16th-storey planting…

Talk and you soon see the layers. Outwardly easygoing, Habib admits to not always feeling that way inside. 'I really miss sketching [his lofty position at Kia mostly precludes it these days]. I often overthink things, and sketching has always helped me with that – it's why I love it. I always remember in school… just the joy of putting on my earphones and sketching.'

Habib also readily admits that, like the rest of us, he's just a human being doing the best he can: to balance emerging technologies with creative authenticity; time with family and a job that could so easily be all-consuming; innovative design and the need to sell cars. 'I can get fired, I know that,' he tells me. 'But at Kia there's an understanding of the need to experiment.

We're talking at Milan Design Week, where Kia is an exhibitor. Habib, who's now based in Germany, just got in from China. 'It doesn't seem to stop,' he smiles, wearily sipping a coffee. 'The travel side of it is pretty rough. I'm just not built for it. But it's partly my doing. We decided to move back to Germany, for the family.'

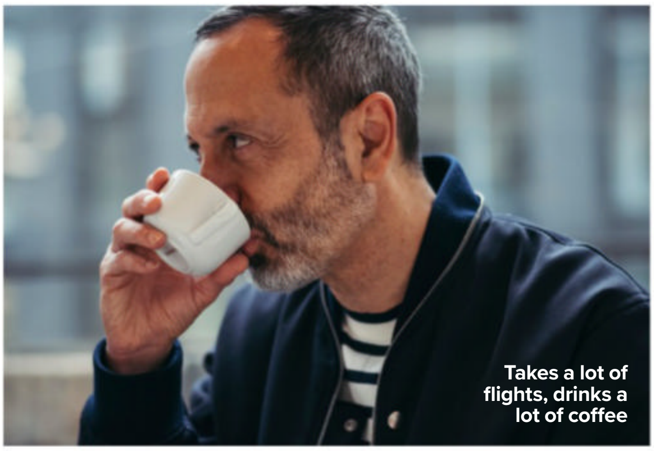
Prior to the move to Frankfurt, Habib lived and worked in South Korea – one chapter in a career that began at BMW in 1998, circled back to Munich after a spell with Mercedes, and that also saw him living and working in Japan, for Infiniti, prior to joining Kia in 2019.

Was it important to live in South Korea; to go full immersion? 'Very, particularly when you're taking responsibility for the whole thing. You can't do that from a distance. I don't think that's even fair.

'The culture is different, particularly the way design is perceived, enabled and listened to. I'm not 100 per cent sure if it's systemic or based on individuals, but at Kia it comes from the top. The chairman really believes in design, as does CEO [Ho-sung] Song, and the design decisions are made by the chairman. He's in our studio once a month and design is always at the table early in the process. It's a key part of the bigger picture, and that makes a huge difference when you're in my position. I've never had that before.'

That Namyang studio is the engine of Habib's global design apparatus – more than 300 people working across interior and exterior design, user interface, modelling, design engineering and CAD/CAS (computer-aided design and styling). Kia also has studios in California, Frankfurt and China. ▶

'Design is a key part of the bigger picture at Kia, and that makes a huge difference. I've never had that before'



Takes a lot of flights, drinks a lot of coffee

EV2 Concept is more organic and 'automotive', versus the geometric, 'industrial' EV3

Habib's responsibility includes interior design and, crucially, user interface

‘In South Korea we have about 30 per cent of the market but elsewhere we're not VW; we don't have to please everyone'

Does a brand need a studio in a market to really understand it? ‘I think so. It's faster this way and maybe more authentic – sometimes the difference lies in the subtleties of perception. China is a great example of this. And then there's the talent. In China, for example, thousands of industrial designers graduate every year. The talent there is incredible, and we need to be there to tap into that.'

Habib clearly relishes Kia's ambition; its status as a well-funded giant on the front foot in a lot of markets, working to take sales from more established brands – some of which he's worked for. As he sees it, the intellectual challenge isn't just selling cars; it's selling Kia.

‘Say you're doing an SUV for the US, but your brand at this point is not going to bring people to it because they don't know it. Instead you have to offer something really positive; it has to sell itself. As a consequence, this idea of understanding the customer profile is very developed in Kia, whereas maybe with brands like Mercedes or BMW… I mean, their brand identity is so clear it just pulls people in.'

Brand identity is a Habib obsession. His first Kia was the EV9, the big, bold all-electric SUV. Now his neat and confident EV3 (World Car of the Year 2025, no less) is out in the wild, garnering praise for its form and function. They're a world away from the fairly generic designs Kia was putting out just a couple of generations ago.

‘We've made a big change and that's down to a few important factors. Most important are the brand and the consistent messaging from the chairman and CEO: “Okay, we're going to change the brand. We're going to make it EV-focused and we're going to shoot for early adopters, focusing on innovation.”

‘If you don't have that kind of meta direction then design cannot change. You can change the styling, but the actual design will be the same. Focusing on EVs gave us a different set of proportions, and proportions are everything. I know, I trained at BMW! Now, with EVs, we need a long wheelbase for the battery, we have short overhangs and we have big wheels. You have technology and you have the brand; design is the glue that brings these things together.

‘I really love the EV3. I'm happy with the direction it's taking us in. My job is to create consistency, and we do that by defining a set of principles, a toolkit; how to do things, not what to do. And it's not only for our EVs. You will see the new Telluride [Kia's three-row SUV] at the end of the year. It follows the same principles but it looks very different, and this has to be the goal. We sell around three million cars a year [3.1 million globally in 2024; the 2025 target is 3.2 million] but being different is in the culture of a Korean company; newness and reinvention are very important. A design philosophy cannot be static. In South Korea we have about 35 per cent of the market but elsewhere we're not VW; we don't have to please everyone, and that means we can take some creative risks.'

Inevitably, that resolve to experiment can lead to output that isn't universally loved. Unveiled last year, the Tasman pick-up – a Hilux/Ranger rival – struggled to appear in headlines that didn't also contain the word ‘ugly'. That must have hurt?

‘Nervousness… expectation… I feel all these things when we release a new car, of course,' says Habib. ‘The reception to the Tasman has been quite polarised, and I do think, “Okay, what could I have done differently?” But I really believe in the direction. We shouldn't be a brand that just brings out cars that look the same as those already in the market. That's not the Kia we want to be.'

The past is a recurring theme in our conversation. It loomed large when Habib worked for BMW and Mercedes; less so, of course, at Infiniti and Kia. ‘When you have heritage with emotional weight it can be very positive,' he acknowledges. ‘You can start something and right away there's an association. We're seeing that with the Renault 5. That's really cool, and a lot of that stems from heritage. But to their credit they reinterpreted it in a successful way; it could have been unsuccessful. So, on one hand I wish I had that. But on the other hand we can keep evolving and pushing and bringing the craft of design further. I think when you don't focus on heritage you have more possibility to question things.'

He also argues that when you're working without the heritage safety net, the pressure to nail the execution is increased.

‘If you're going to do something different then the need to have perfect execution increases by a factor. If you do something new and the execution doesn't feel quite right you make it very difficult to digest. Take the EV3, for example. You're right about it being geometric, and from some corners it does look quite boxy. Sometimes I think, “Did we go too geometric?” But it works really well, and in part that's because we worked hard on the execution. If you don't do these things right it won't work.'

The EV2 is a concept car for now. But we'll see the production version at the end of the year, the essence of the design largely unchanged. It builds on the EV3's solid foundations while introducing a little more curvature; some shrubbery on the skyscraper's angular framework, if you will.

‘I don't want the pendulum to go too far in the geometric direction,' says Habib. ‘The whole point of this design philosophy – a set of principles rather than specific elements – is that it can change. EV2 is more focused on Europe, so it needs to feel more automotive, if you ▶

think of automotive design as being more organic and industrial design as more geometric. EV4 is also a balance of the two.'

I first met Habib during his second spell with BMW, and the German brand and his work for it are an ever-present thread running through his career and our conversations. His design career began at BMW in 1998 – the first of two successful spells bookending a brief tenure at arch rival Mercedes.

At the 2015 Concorso d'Elegance Villa d'Este, Habib unveiled the show-stopping BMW 3.0 CSL Hommage, a striking re-imagining of the 'Batmobile' of the '70s: one of the most important and visually arresting cars in Munich's icon-packed back catalogue. The concept was designed by fellow Pasadena graduate Won Kyu Kang, then working under Habib, and it's a mark of the level of ambition at Kia design now that it signed Kang from BMW back in 2020. He now leads Kia's interior design innovation group.

Habib talks fondly of BMW, with which he first had contact while he was still at college. 'I was at ArtCenter in California, studying with two instructors who were working at BMW Designworks. These guys were just these wonderful creative souls. Together with Chris Bangle, they helped me understand there was a whole crazy world of creativity out there. The E65 [7-series, the Adrian van Hooydonk-penned harbinger of Bangle's flame-surfaced era] hadn't come out yet but they were already thinking about it.'

A few years later, Habib's exterior was chosen for the E65's successor, the F01. 'That was huge. The whole design team was called into the hall and then, in front of everybody, they announced I'd got it. It was nice, but tough for the ones that don't get selected.'

If BMW nurtured his creativity and conviction that proportions are everything, his time at Mercedes-Benz was equally eye-opening. 'At Mercedes I learned what confidence is. That brand is amazing. It feels like they can do anything. And they can. They can build the most expensive two-door coupe and then a taxi and then a truck, but they've all got that three-pointed star, right? BMW was always very conscious of how high they could price things; how far they could push that. At Mercedes I never got that feeling.'

A self-confessed car nerd, Habib was born in Lebanon but left aged six when civil war gave his family little option but to go. 'My father didn't want to leave. He was sad about it; heartbroken. But we applied to [live in] France, Canada and the US, and Canada came up.'

> 'The AI proposed completely finished ideas. You don't know if you're going the right way because you've already arrived'

Fencing, not car design, was the driving passion through his teenage years. 'We had a guy in my high school who was top three in the world – that's what inspired me to start. My goal was the Olympics, so while I loved the idea of architecture I thought that might be too intense alongside the fencing. So I chose engineering. Fencing didn't work out, as you might have guessed, and I discovered I'm really bad at engineering! But I was sketching anyway and then I discovered design. I would go to the university library, find the car design magazines and try to copy the sketches.'

Fittingly for a huge admirer of Bertone's work, Habib keeps an Alfa coupe, a 1964 Sprint GT, admitting 'it gets less and less driveable each year'. His 1979 Toyota Land Cruiser, on the other hand, is immaculate. 'It's totally standard and I love driving it. It starts every time and has some lovely features, like the curved rear windows.' But the time to enjoy his cars is limited – family and work come first. 'My daughters are 11 and 13. Our eldest daughter is now a teenager and asks my wife and me deep questions about identity and belonging. These are things that keep me awake at night! I travel a lot. I don't want to be an absent father, and I won't be.'

We've circled back to the theme of balance: the geometric and the organic, work and life, technology and humanity.

'What we perhaps don't talk about so much is the people; that human side. We see these metal machines on the road but there's a lot of human endeavour in all of them.'

Certainly there is right now, but among Habib's current preoccupations are the risks and rewards of AI.

'We had a review a few months ago, for a future design project, and all the designers used AI. Honestly, I was overwhelmed. In my career I learned that good design comes through iteration; through a process of improvement. But the AI proposed completely finished ideas. It's challenging. You don't know if you're going the right way because you've already arrived – you don't see the journey. It's like you've been dropped at the destination. It was our first try, and I don't think we're going to do it that way again.'

For now Habib's much more comfortable with those thrilling moments of human inspiration, away from the CAD and the code.

'We're working on the next Carnival [Kia's big three-row MPV], selecting the design. One of our new designers did a sketch and when I first saw it I thought: "Can this work?" John [Buckingham, VP and head of Kia next design exterior group] and I talked about it and we were like, "Okay, let's try it." I saw the model last week, and it's amazing. I don't know how you describe it; those moments of inspiration that somehow drop from the sky. I love those individual moments of creativity – where somebody doesn't follow the same direction, on purpose or not, and something magical comes of it.' car

HARD ON THE GAS

Emissions rules will kill the 911 GT3… won't they? But Porsche's GT boss has a few tricks up his sleeve

Words Georg Kacher **Photography** Steffen Jahn

Preuninger: quietly confident that the future of GT is safe

After 48 hours of dawn-to-dusk Alpine romping in the latest manual-transmission Porsche 992.2 911 GT3 Touring, every fibre and tissue of my body hurts. At night, the left leg is cramping through boy-racer dreams while the right hand phantom-shifts through the H-gate of a virtual gearbox. The neck muscles ache for days from excess g-force folly. Wedged into the optional one-size-fits-some carbonfibre bucket seat, the broad hips rub themselves purple, the spine starts a painful new career as supplementary shock absorber, and the pain in the arms is morphing from glow to burn as they keep wrestling the wheel.

When you pull out all the stops, the new GT3 is hard work. But like the closely related 911 S/T, its aphrodisiac effect stimulates all the senses. Sounds familiar? Because that is, in a nutshell, what we have said about almost every previous hot 911, from the 355bhp 996 batmobile to the 493bhp 991.2 that pioneered the stealth Touring pack.

What exactly is the secret behind the GT3 legend? Andreas Preuninger, seasoned keeper of the GT flame, answers like a shot: 'It's that special mix of raw power, absolute precision and total accessibility. Like the even sharper RS, the GT3 celebrates the fascination of the high-revving normally aspirated six-cylinder boxer engine – at least as long as regulations permit it.'

And there's the rub. Can Porsche keep finding fresh ways to stay ahead of ever-tightening emissions regulations, in both spirit and letter?

'True, the more stringent upcoming EU7 emission norm is a major challenge, but we are confident to master it. Evolution is key: small steps, minor modifications, careful updates, continuous fine tuning, detail improvements here and there. It's imperative to preserve the unique unfiltered character of the GT3 which will always emphasise ultra-light weight, a highly responsive drivetrain and exceptionally intuitive handling characteristics.'

Our car is a silver GT3 Touring with three-pedal layout, optional rear seats and Lightweight pack, which as well as lightening your wallet by almost £30k saves over 22kg thanks to forged magnesium wheels; roof, seats and anti-roll bar made of carbonfibre; a smaller battery; and a pared-down interior. With a couple of other extras, the test car's grand total comes to a whisker over £200k. Even the base price of £158,200 is a lot of money for a special 911 that's effectively 0.9sec slower off the mark and £20k more expensive than the new PDK-equipped GTS hybrid.

The GT3 is about authenticity (no turbo, no hybrid), individuality (many options), differentiation (the GT3 must always be a sharper tool than a Turbo or a GTS) and emotion (a less digital, more analogue vibe). All of which is potentially in conflict with the need to run clean.

Says Preuninger: 'High revs are part of our DNA, but there comes a point when an extra 500 or 750rpm will spell extra stress, noise and cost. There are more intelligent ways of boosting the output than raising the redline beyond 9000rpm, quite apart from the fact that both GT3 engines sit quite happily in their comfort zone, which is somewhere between 500 and 550bhp. Likewise, top speed is as a rule only a by-product, never a chief development goal.'

It's significant that this latest GT3 signals an end to the habit of every model making more power than its predecessor; peak output is the same 503bhp. But it's still a step forward, because of all the lightweighting and dynamic sharpening – GT specialities – achieved by Preuninger's team.

There's a level at which every 911 has a lot in common: a flat-six engine with its distinctive sound and weight distribution, and that silhouette. But zoom in closer and it's clear that the Carrera/GTS/Turbo part of the family and the GT3/RS/GT2 bloodline are increasingly distinct. The GT models follow a strict 'less is more' philosophy: no four-wheel drive, no sunroof, no surplus mod cons. Instead, they are low-fat, high-efficiency reduce-to-the-max creations fusing reduced weight, minimum friction, near-zero tolerances, optimised aerodynamics and an analogue soul with as little digital supervision and control as possible.

The 2025 GT3 comes with a shorter final drive ratio that kicks butt even more energetically thanks to its eight per cent faster gearing and the subjectively quicker shifts. Compared to the 991.2 Touring I bought back in 2018 before trading it in for a Turbo in 2022 (a mistake? The inner jury is still out), the shortened gearlever of the new model slices through the gate with greater clickety-click precision and slicker ease. The clutch, too, feels lighter and more progressive, and the snappier throttle picks up revs with extra urgency.

Although the manual loses half a second to the PDK model when accelerating from zero to 62mph (3.9 against 3.4sec), working the clutch in sync with the gearlever is a treat I would never voluntarily relinquish. Getting it right – especially when lateral and longitudinal forces attack in full – is hugely satisfying.

How do the engineers manage to keep raising the bar in an environment increasingly confined by tight budgets and mushrooming legislative restrictions? What are the tools they use to innovate and modernise, hone and refine, improve and enhance the performance and efficiency without clouding the character of the GT family of cars as they grapple across all the ranges with the challenge of complying with the tougher EU7 tailpipe norms that come into effect on 29 November 2026?

Porsche's path to cleaner combustion engines has not been a straightforward one recently. For almost three years, water injection appeared to be the only way to cool down the mixture, improve the thermodynamic efficiency, increase the output by a fraction and comply with emissions requirements even under critical full-throttle, high-speed driving conditions. Syringing water into the intake manifolds is a proven technology, but in the case of the 911 it requires a bulky 20-litre water tank, a busy network of pipes and injectors, a distilled-water supply chain (think of it as AdBlue for the rich) and a complex anti-freeze cold-weather H2O removal system which sounds a bit like a child slurping a smoothie but is allegedly more energy-efficient than heated nozzles.

Although water injection is still believed to be Porsche's technology of choice for the V8, indications from Germany's federal transport authority, the KBA, suggest the flat-six might be spared after all. According to the Weissach grapevine, enriching the fuel-air flow above 100mph ▶

THE GT3 IS ABOUT AUTHENTICITY AND EMOTION, WHICH MEANS IT'S POTENTIALLY IN CONFLICT WITH THE NEED TO RUN CLEAN

Auxiliary lights no longer separate, so more room for air intakes

Touring loses big fixed rear wing, but aerodynamics still finely crafted

ANDREAS PREUNINGER'S FAVOURITES FROM 25 YEARS OF HOT 911S

The man responsible for every Porsche GT this century picks the best

993 CARRERA 2: COMPANY CAR
For his first Porsche lease, Preuninger chose a Triple Black convertible. Accessible, entertaining, involving – a built-to-last classic, especially in widebody C2S guise.

991 GT2 RS: BEYOND SUBLIMITY
The most recent GT2 is a masterfully balanced piece of kit combining raw power and purity, smoothness and breathtaking ability like no other 911.

992 S/T: RÖHRL'S FAVOURITE
A GT3 Touring on steroids, the low-key look belies its overwhelming talent. A brutally competent car which exhausts the driver when pushed hard. That magic 525bhp RS engine is matched by chassis and brakes, adding up to a 911 special enough to get the vote of rally and race legend (and long-time Porsche ambassador) Walter Röhrl, as well as Preuninger.

997 GT2 RS: HOOLIGAN'S DELIGHT
The baddest 911 ever was limited to 500 units, boasted a 612bhp 3.6-litre engine that gave turbo lag a whole new meaning, and weighed just 1370kg thanks to extensive carbonfibre doctoring. Its on-the-limit handling is not for the faint hearted.

911 T: THE EVERGREEN 911
When the T received the six-speed gearbox it deserved, this junior GT re-established the old goose-pimple throttle-blip excitement in a price bracket accessible to mere mortals. The £12k this model costs in excess of the PDK-equipped C2 is money well spent.

992 TURBO S: BEST ALL-ROUNDER
This is the car Preuninger picks for long-distance solo stints involving a fair share of autobahn work. Punchy yet comfortingly long-legged, the all-wheel-drive Turbo S is a compelling all-weather 24/7 driving machine. The beefed-up 2026 model will be more stunning still, he promises.

992 GT3 RS: ROAD MEETS TRACK
Fathered by the RSR race car, the RS is a precision instrument for those who take trackdays very seriously, boasting three additional drive modes geared for all eventualities.

991 R: FATHER OF THE TOURING
No whaletail spoiler here but plenty of subtle drag-cutting addenda complete with trad cloth upholstery and eye-catching stripework. Collectors bought it as an investment, but payback took a long time coming since the 991 Touring that followed was in essence a correctly priced R.

993 SPEEDSTER: THE UNICORN
Only two were ever built, plus a recent made-to-measure reincarnation for an Italian customer. Like all 911s before and after it, the coke-bottle 993 and the elaborate Speedster top were a super-sweet fit.

997 4.0 RS: WILD WHITE WONDER
This possesses a steering rack that's an astonishing feat of exactness and tactility. Super smooth and steamhammer strong, this is arguably the most emotional 911 ever: hellishly noisy, no air-con, brutal clutch, resin-filled transmission. Hugely rewarding and memorable.

GT3 RS
S GO 5017

EXPECT 2028'S NEW GT2 RS TO COMBINE ELECTRICALLY ENHANCED TURBOCHARGERS AND A MORE POWERFUL HYBRID

may actually be a legal measure since it protects the engine and the catalyst in particular against overheating, even though it momentarily pushes emissions above the limit.

At the time of writing it looks likely that Porsche will have withdrawn water injection from the imminent new Turbo, which is believed to feature the hybrid pack of the GTS and two e-turbos for an output of approximately 750bhp in the case of the Turbo S, due in production early next year. Likewise, the future 2029 GT3, provisionally rated at 518bhp and 354lb ft, should be able to avoid the complex, costly and cumbersome excess baggage, as should the next GT3 RS.

In the case of the RS, expected in 2027, insiders predict pre-chamber ignition will be used to keep pollutant emissions below the critical level. With the help of a second spark plug, acting like a flame thrower, the system effectively cascades two combustion events for increased ignition energy in the main chamber. Like the current RS, its replacement will again be powered by a high-revving naturally aspirated engine, sources say. In contrast, the GT2 RS earmarked for 2028 is believed to combine two electrically enhanced turbochargers with a more powerful T-hybrid module, four heated catalysts, four particulate filters and said pre-chamber ignition for a boost in power output from 691 to around 800 or even 850bhp. Even four figures might be possible, but such a monster engine would probably be reserved for an unconfirmed 911-based hypercar designed along the lines of the radical 1996 GT1 Evo.

So, life in the old petrol-slurping dog yet.

'High output and best-in-segment performance are essential virtues of all Porsche GT cars,' says Preuninger. 'But at the end of the day it's the power-to-weight ratio that matters most, so we must keep the lid on toxins like size and bulk. You only need dramatically more potent engines when you build dramatically bigger and heavier cars, and when you do that the sweet spots – handling, driveability, feedback, balance – invariably suffer. That's why I am perfectly happy with the current format of the compact, chuckable and controllable GT3, which doesn't need an extra 50 or 100 horses to excel. Instead, our focus is to bring on improvements like even craftier dampers, even more clever aerodynamics and an even more intuitive man-machine interface. In combination with a stringent diet in terms of component design and materials used, this will bring us a crucial step closer to the holy grail.'

Over the Fernpass and up the Brenner we go, then down to Brixen and from there straight into the arms of the Dolomites. Past Canazei, the Porsche picks up the late afternoon sun until the fireball sets behind the Tre Croce mammoth mountain just as the newly designed digital five-dial instrument panel draws attention to the final fuel level warning: 14.7mpg average consumption, only 21 clicks to empty and still two more summits to climb until the fire-spitting six-legged black dog that's the logo of Supercortemaggiore filling stations signals relief. While the 90-litre tank swallows its due, the driver briefly diverts to memory lane where all the GT3 past masters are parked. Among them the very first 996, a sinewy and notoriously angry muscle pack. The red-over-white RS we pitted against the even wilder Lamborghini Gallardo Superleggera. The awesome 4.0 RS, that epitome of GT3 greatness.

And of course the very first undercover Touring which added an extremely fetching third personality to the theme in 2017. My personal favourite? A low-mileage stealth 992.1 manual with front axle lift in a subtle off-beat colour. As Saturday night TikTok magnet, Sunday morning getaway car and fair-weather weekday driver, not much comes close. car

How much longer will Porsche be able to make roadgoing GTs?

Our cars

HELLO HONDA CIVIC TYPE R + GOODBYE MAZDA MX-30, AUDI S3 & MERC GLC + INSIDE RENAULT'S SCENIC FACTORY

'It's just a normal Superb, officer – I promise...'

Rich Pearce

SKODA SUPERB ESTATE **MONTH 3**

Why so serious?

We come over a bit *Max Power* as our sensible Superb meets one with a touch of the Joker about it. By **Jake Groves**

The story so far

Our sensible Superb meets an un-sensible one

+ Skoda gets all the sober stuff right, and has an appetite for some fun now and again too

– The previous-gen Superb looks so much better than mine; I'll miss the Sleeper's performance

Logbook

Price £44,140 (£45,430 as tested) **Performance** 1968cc turbodiesel four-cylinder, 190bhp, 295lb ft, 7.5sec 0-62mph, 148mph **Efficiency** 46.7mpg (official), 44.0mpg (tested) **Energy cost** 15.7p per mile **Miles this month** 1754 **Total miles** 3322

Industrial-looking multi-storey car park, moody lighting and a modified car to ogle at? It's all gone a bit *Max Power*.

Let's be honest, on its own my Superb wouldn't have even registered on the *Max Power* radar. It's grey, has small-ish wheels, uses the 'wrong' fuel and its body style has traditionally been ignored by most modifiers. But the green one is a different story entirely.

These two Superbs have plenty in common. They're both very well built, come with a great driving position, have a massive boot capable of taking a house move in its stride, and are loaded with kit.

The green one is in top-spec Lauren & Klement spec, finished in fabulous Royal Green (a limited-edition colour that celebrated King Charles' coronation in 2023) and comes with a Cognac interior; mine, as mentioned in my first report, looks and sounds like your local minicab but – despite being a lower SE L spec – comes with a similar and sometimes better equipment list.

Now the engine and gearbox in my car have fully loosened up, I'm doing long-distance motorway drives with fuel economy better than 50mpg. It's helped a friend move house with its utterly enormous boot. It's managed airport runs, with those in the rear treated to legroom worthy of a Mercedes S-Class. In fact, there isn't very much that my, or indeed any, Superb can't do.

But the green one isn't just any Skoda Superb. This is the Sleeper – a modified previous-generation Superb estate with upgrades that would make some *Max Power* veterans drool, and would indeed make a great car for traffic cops too.

It was built to celebrate the general brilliantness of the Superb as the third-generation version bowed out to make way for the fourth-generation model I'm running. By Skoda's reckoning the Superb is the most award-winning car in its history, and it's very proud of that.

The Sleeper has been meticulously tweaked by RE Performance, the team that helped Skoda to a Bonneville land speed record with a one-off Octavia. That Octavia and this Superb should be enough to make you rethink your perception of Skoda, if you view it as dull but worthy.

So, yes, as well as being able ▶

Sleeper is last gen but higher spec than ours

to carry all sorts of people and things while looking pretty smart, the Sleeper defies its conventional appearance by breathing fire on demand. Those folk at RE Performance, encouraged by Skoda UK, took the turbocharged 2.0-litre petrol four and increased its peak power output from 272bhp to 470bhp, with 488lb ft of torque, good for a 4.0sec 0-62mph sprint and a top speed in excess of 180mph.

That's been achieved chiefly by fitting a massive Garrett PowerMax turbocharger into the engine bay, upgrading the intercooler and induction system to match, and remapping the ECU to manage the power better. That's not all; you may have noticed those glowing red AP Racing brake calipers as well as the low-profile Yokohama semi-slick tyres. Coilover suspension from Koni has subtly lowered the ride height, and has been calibrated to ensure the Sleeper can cope with high-speed cornering.

The entire performance mix is exhilarating, like a bigger and beefier VW Golf R. There's a purposeful growl to the engine, which like the rest of the car strikes a good balance between staying under the radar and doing just enough to catch the attention of the enthusiast.

Pottering about, the driving experience is largely similar; the ride is a bit harder, there's a smidge more tyre noise and the brakes are very grabby.

But get the DSG in the right gear and the Sleeper warps into the distance, the boost really kicking in at around 3000rpm. It's very fast and extremely happy to rev, the whole experience feeling a little surreal when you look down at the steering wheel to see a Skoda badge.

Those coilovers and brakes play their part very well, too. I find myself tackling corners at speeds I wouldn't dare with some sports cars, and yet the Sleeper sticks to the road like a barnacle weathering high tide and slingshots me out the other end. And the brakes! Few cars this side of a McLaren have given me so much confidence.

The entire performance mix is exhilarating, like a bigger and beefier VW Golf R

When I got back in my Superb, I didn't feel that short changed. Yes, I maintain that this new generation simply doesn't look as clean and cool as the previous version did, but it's still a do-everything, go-anywhere, diesel-powered Tardis that has been utterly painless to live with so far.

Would I like to access the Sleeper's performance more often? Of course I would. But vast diesel torque, creamily delivered, and some journeys clocking in over 50mpg are more than enough to win me back.

At glance, nothing to see here. But green Sleeper is far hotter

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R **MONTH 1**

Hello

That's the spirit

Looking for the spirit of Soichiro in modern Hondas, two-wheeled or four, is a waste of time. But there's hope – for now. By **Ben Miller**

The story so far

Arguably the finest hot hatch on sale, here to prove a) it's worth £52k and b) it has an actual repertoire, not simply a USP

+ Sweet manual 'box, Championship white paint, the state of the front-wheel-drive art

- Price is a couple of grand shy of a four-cylinder Cayman…

Logbook

Price £51,905 (£52,605 as tested) **Performance** 1996cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 324bhp, 310lb ft, 5.5sec 0-62mph, 171mph **Efficiency** 34.3mpg (official), 30.6mpg (tested), 186g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 21.0p per mile **Miles this month** 179 **Total miles** 1933

Well, so, this'll be interesting. This generation Civic Type R and I first met abroad; two days of fun in the rain in Portugal. We had a blast. No commitment was sought or given, and when the time came for me to head to the airport that was it; we just said our goodbyes.

Have I thought about those two days since? Of course. Those red bucket seats, anatomically perfect. That flawless shift. The way the thing moved; unthinkingly intuitive and precise like something NASA might use to align ceramic tiles on a fuselage. And that raging 2.0-litre four: thick with torque, potent and fast everywhere in a way older, pre-turbo Type R motors absolutely were not.

We hooked up twice more, for a couple of days at a time. High on the Yorkshire Moors – an alien sun baking the gorse to tinder – things weren't quite the same. Two talented rear-wheel-drive 'rivals' (the then-new BMW M2 and Porsche's wicked but wickedly expensive 718 Cayman GTS) made the Honda, so good in isolation, feel a little one-dimensional. It was scarcely any slower but, in extremis, offered fewer options.

But when Toyota released an upgraded (and considerably more expensive) GR Yaris, the Honda and I rediscovered the old magic. It wasn't a thrashing but for me the polished Honda showed up its rally-derived rival in myriad areas, from cabin quality to straight-line speed, gearshift to driving position.

'Essentially, the Honda is the better car and the GR Yaris the more exciting one,' I wrote. 'The Yaris is harder to drive. Frenetic and highly strung, it's the more authentic hot hatch of the two. But long-term you'll have a better time in the Civic.'

We'll find out. This Honda Civic Type R's mine for six whole months; six months in which to enjoy deep and meaningful conversations, feed each other forkfuls and work out if there might be some karmic-chi love thing happening here. Either way ,we're set for heartbreak: just three years in, Honda's just announced it's discontinuing Civic Type R sales in Europe.

In terms of spec this example is perfect, not least because Honda gives you very little scope to mess it up. There are no options and the paint is, quite correctly, Championship White (£700; the only no-cost colour is grey). Still, £52,605 is a lot of money. And this uncomfortable truth – rather than how damn good the car is – has dogged this FL5 Type R since the beginning. You suspect it's stifled sales, too, given that at the time of writing Honda UK is offering a £2500 deposit contribution and 6.9 per cent APR.

Would I put one in my garage? Time will tell, but if you're at all tempted now is not the time to dawdle. With Renault and Ford long out of the fight and Honda now climbing from the ring, these really are black days for the hot hatch as we know and love it.

Lee Brimble

BMW M5 MONTH 2

Split loyalties

A dalliance with the Mercedes-Benz E53 gives us a chance to reassess where our affections really rest. By **Piers Ward**

The story so far

Driving a rival shows how sharp the M5 is, and how much it needs softer rear suspension

+ Incredible pace and range; overall usability; decent room

- Overly firm rear suspension; sheer size

Logbook

Price £111,515 (£133,670 as tested) **Performance** 18.6kWh battery, 4395cc 32v twin-turbo V8 plus e-motor, 717bhp, 738lb ft **Efficiency** 148-176mpg (official), 29.2mpg (tested), 37-39g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 24.7p per mile **Miles this month** 1513 **Total miles** 5009

What is it they say about absence? The M5 was nabbed by James Dennison for a *CAR* video so I took the opportunity to try a Mercedes-AMG E53, currently the top of the E-Class line-up until the next E63 comes along. (That's likely to be a six-cylinder, whereas the M5 and Audi RS6 have V8s.)

They're not direct rivals but it's an interesting exercise in seeing how the two go about hybridising performance. The E is an easier car to immediately bond with because the hybrid integration is slightly smoother – there's less lurch as the engine kicks in – and the ride comfort is better than on the M.

The Merc's nose can still patter across bumps but there's a sense of give and compliance that's missing from the BMW, a slightly more long-legged gait to the chassis which would make big trips easier to bear.

In the E, the hybrid feels like it's more in tune with the ethos of the car, a system that's designed to relax with you but still get you there quickly. In the M5, the hybrid can sometimes feel like an afterthought that's getting in the way of just enjoying the shove of the V8.

Like the M5, the E53 has a daftly fat steering wheel – made even worse in the Merc's case by the horizontal twin-spoke layout and the tacky centre-mark surrounded by plasticky carbon. Honestly, what's wrong with a plain circle?

That aside, it got to the stage where I wasn't missing the BMW because the E's pace was giving me a similar adrenaline rush but without the minor annoyances of the M.

But then Denno handed the M5 keys back and I felt like I'd been terribly disloyal to it. It's a small thing, but the kids had nicknamed the M5 'Bluey', whereas they hadn't bonded particularly with the Merc, so it was a bit like a family member returning.

Immediately, everything felt sharper and more responsive; I'd forgotten how brutal that V8 can sound and less synthesised than the E53's six. The BMW doesn't turn in any sharper than the E-Class but feels more natural when it does so, with a more nuanced rear-wheel-steering set-up.

The E-Class is an easy car to relax with but it's the M5 that stretches you more and also yields more, with a depth of ability that you don't get in the Mercedes.

Our M5's fuel economy has refused to shift from its 29.2mpg average, despite plenty of charging at home. Initially I was a bit disappointed with this: all that weight penalty for the PHEV and not even cracking 30mpg. And the last M5, the F90, claimed 26.9mpg and achieved a real-world 23.4mpg when Mark Walton ran one in Our Cars. Why bother with all the complications of the plug-in when the gains are small?

And then I ran the numbers. Assuming 10,000 miles a year, the difference works out at over £10,000 annually. Maybe BMW *does* know what it's doing.

Simon Thompson

Big car gives big sky a run for its money

And off it goes; we rather wish it would stay

Goodbye

AUDI S3 **MONTH 8**

The Goldilocks hatch

Not wild like the RS3, not plain like the A3, maybe the S3 is actually the pick of the range. By **Curtis Moldrich**

The story so far

Not the A3, not the RS3 – but does the S have its own strengths?

+ Understated looks; decent range; interior quality

- Lacks the final degree of sportiness and pizazz

Logbook

Price £47,490 (£51,135 as tested) **Performance** 1984cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 328bhp, 4.7sec 0-62mph, 155mph **Efficiency** 34.4mpg (official), 17.4mpg (tested), 188g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 27.1p per mile **Miles this month** 1425 **Total miles** 6374

Saying goodbye to the S3 is proving trickier than expected. Six months ago, I wanted to know if the middleweight Audi was finally a true driver's car, with the feeling and engagement to match its unquestioned performance. I drove rivals, covered thousands of miles and directly compared it to the more hardcore RS3 in search of an answer. My verdict? Not quite. And my personal revelation? I don't really care that it falls short of those ultimates – it has a lot else to commend it.

Compared to the RS3 it feels woolly and imprecise, a steak knife to the ultimate hatch's scalpel. Its turbocharged four-cylinder engine is perfectly fine, offering 328bhp and more than enough shove for the motorway – but it's no rare specimen like the five-cylinder in the RS3.

The S3's interior is also closer to the A3's than any discerning customer would hope. There's a tang of the mundane in its monochrome menus and piano black finishing that no amount of alcantara or S badges can fix. And the handling, while on rails in even the worst conditions, isn't the last word in driver feedback either.

So why am I about to defend Ingolstadt's 'almost there' hatch for the next 260 words?

Perhaps it's because I love an underdog. It's an easy car to dismiss as destined to be one level below the maximum Ingolstadt is capable off, and its reputation for a lack of feel has followed it through the generations like a Habsburg chin. In a crowd with A35s, ever sillier 1-series BMWs and Honda Type Rs it looks a bit boring. Compared to those cars it's not as much fun to drive, either.

Take the S3 away from the rarefied concerns of those aficionados, however, and you'll find that it's fantastic to run and own. Not once have I wished for more performance, more feel or more front splitter.

On the boring days it's practical and roomy, with enough grip to feel planted in even the most precarious conditions. On the better days it's able to claw out of roundabout exits or carve up B-roads in its relatively unhinged Dynamic Plus mode. RS3 hand-me-down it may be, but the limited-slip differential pings you out of corners with centrifugal ease.

Would I buy an S3? Almost certainly. It's no group test winner, but if like many people your needs look like a Venn diagram, you'll probably find the S3 slap bang in the middle. In reality the RS3 can't do much over the S3 on public roads, and there are a few things – going under the radar, for instance – that the S3 does a little better than its steroidal brother.

Practical, quick, reliable and good-looking, it's a master of none – and one of the best hot hatches on sale today.

Count the cost

Cost new £51,135 **Part exchange** £48,896 **Cost per mile** 17.7p **Cost per mile including depreciation** 52.8p

RENAULT SCENIC MONTH 3

The tough get going

Renault's risen to the Chinese challenge by reinventing an old factory to build EVs like our Scenic. By **Ben Whitworth**

The story so far

Off to northern France – home is where the heart is, after all

+ 450-mile jaunt is covered easily and in comfort, which shouldn't be noteworthy but is

- Ride quality is very good on France's smooth roads; less so back in the UK

Logbook

Price £45,495 (£46,745 as tested) **Performance** 87kWh battery, e-motor, 215bhp, 7.9sec 0-62mph, 105mph **Efficiency** 4.2 miles per kWh (official), 3.7 miles per kWh (tested) **Range** 369 miles (official), 325 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 3.4p per mile **Miles this month** 1599 **Total miles** 4797

I'm pretty sure it's not just me. I love visiting car factories, whether it's a low-volume, high-value marque making cars by hand, or a mainstream behemoth where robots out-number human workers. They're incredible environments that combine so much ingenuity to create some of the world's most sophisticated consumer products. The fascination is multiplied many times over when the people who work there make the time to talk you through it.

I drive to Renault's plant in Douai – the heart of its EV production – in the Scenic, which was made there. I leave home fully charged with an indicated 320 miles showing and reach the Eurotunnel terminal in Folkestone 125 miles later with 187 miles showing. That's an average of 3.7 miles per kW hour – versus the official 4.2 miles per kWh economy figure – which leaves plenty in reserve for the 92-mile coastal dogleg to Dunkirk and south to Douai.

The Scenic gets me there with a relaxed confidence. Google maps, chilled air-con, pumping Harman Kardon sound system, overtaking punch – they all combine to insulate me from the potential stress of roadworks and dawdling drivers.

The production facility at Douai dates back to 1970, although it didn't start mass producing cars until 1975, and is now called ElectriCity.

Neatly, the first cars to roll off the Douai assembly line in 1975 were Renault 5s. Half a century later it's the all-electric Renault 5 that's being produced, alongside the Megane, Scenic and Alpine A290.

'We started with just the Megane E-Tech in 2022, and in 2023 we were the first plant in the Renault Group to go fully into electric production. By the end of 2025 Douai will be producing six EVs for Renault, Nissan and Mitsubishi,' says Anne-Catherine Brieux, head of industrial operations for Ampere, Renault's electric division. 'The focus for our 7500 Ampere employees – with 2815 here at Douai – is multi-layered and inter-connected: a 50 per cent reduction in EV production costs by 2027, carbon neutrality, continuous training, reduced site footprint and full data management.'

Like every car factory in ▶

Now all it needs is some sweet wrappers in the door pockets

CSCD

Some jobs at Douai need the human touch

Europe there are all sorts of pressures weighing down on Douai, especially from the direction of China, which is much quicker at developing and building new cars. Renault is rising to the challenge.

Douai plant director Pierre-Emmanuel Andrieux succinctly sums up the job: 'Make it better, faster and cheaper.' He's confident of success. 'We have already realised a 30 per cent cut in costs, and carbon neutrality across Ampere is on target for 2030.'

Douai is clean, bright and quiet. Running on two shifts on five-day cycles, the factory makes 540 cars a day, soon rising to 700 a day.

I experience an almost childish sense of glee when I spot a white right-hand-drive Scenic like mine making its way quietly down the production line, sandwiched between two bright green 5s. It's mind-frying to think of the logistics: every model ordered from every European market will come down Douai's production lines. Soon that will be four platforms and eight models – on average each comprising 1200 parts – on the same line at any given time.

The production line is fed with parts supplied by a fleet of 400 automated guided vehicles – rectangular electric robots – that move around the factory following magnetic strips embedded in the floor, pushing and pulling the correct parts and components to the exact point where they're needed. Step in front of their path, and they'll brake to a halt and wait patiently for you to step aside.

Key to this just-in-time accuracy is Ampere's widespread adoption of cloud computing. The majority of the 900-odd robots across the site are cloud connected and collectively generate 400 million pieces of data each day that are interrogated in real time.

Julien Real, amping up production

I experience a childish sense of glee when I spot a Scenic like mine on the production line

'This AI-powered analysis has been instrumental in achieving quality control protocols that even five years ago we could only dream of,' says Andrieux.

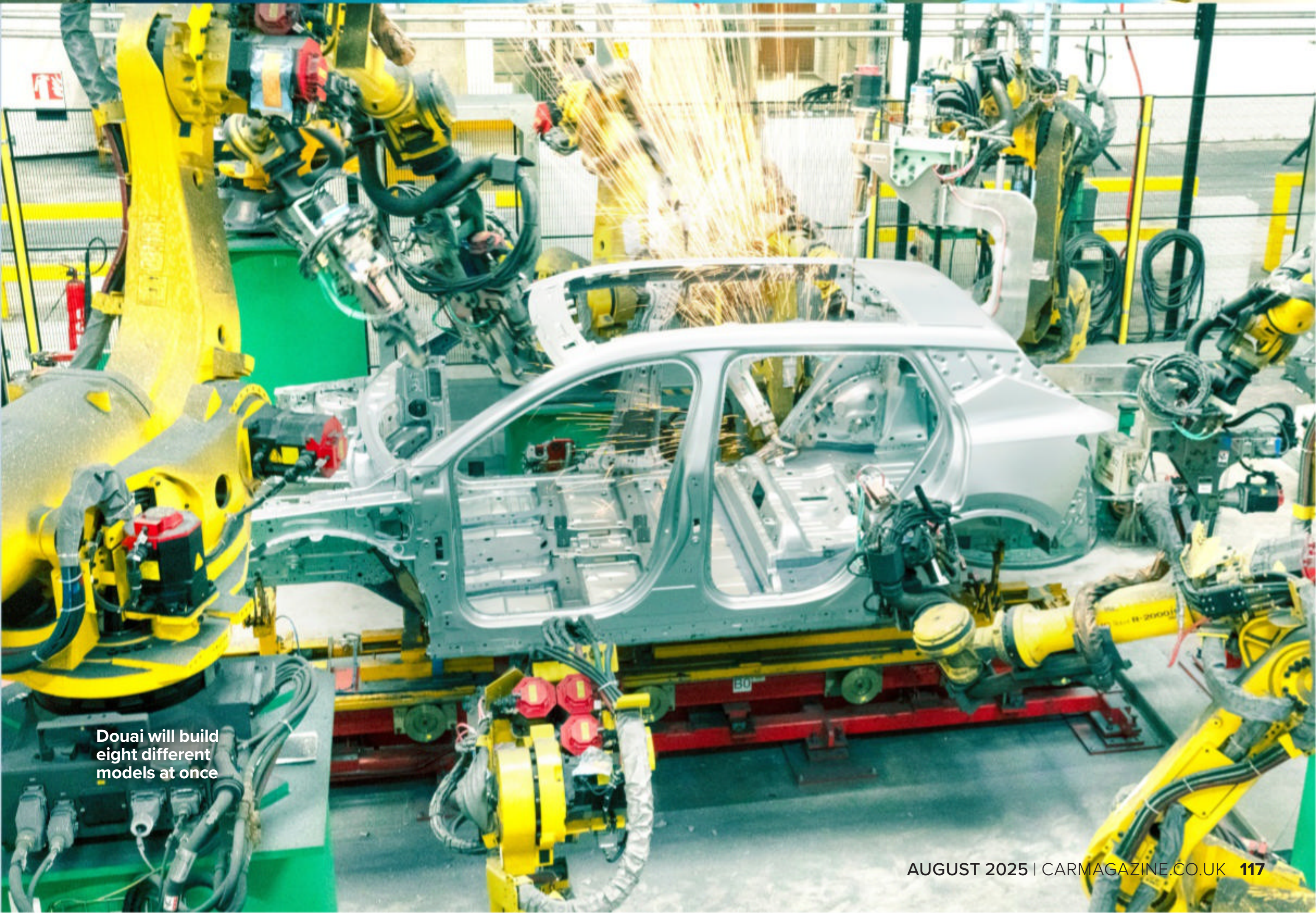
If the core production area is calm, clean and quiet then the pristine and near-silent battery assembly section is straight out of a sci-fi movie. 'There are eight battery variations to manage,' explains Julien Real, Ampere's battery boss. 'The 5 uses batteries from on-site supplier AESC, and we assemble the Scenic and Megane batteries using casings from a contract Douai-based supplier and lithium nickel manganese cobalt oxide battery modules from LG in Poland.'

Each worker in the battery assembly area undergoes four weeks of training before they can be a part of the surprisingly hands-on battery assembly process. 'Current output is around 700 battery units per day, in readiness for when the new models come on stream,' says Real.

It's easy to sip too readily from the Kool-Aid, but I leave Douai with a new-found sense of understanding of the do-or-die turnaround Renault has achieved. In 2020, reeling after the pandemic, the flailing performance of partner Nissan and the Carlos Ghosn fiasco, it posted losses of £6.6 billion. Group chief executive Luca de Meo – now departing – revealed the company was haemorrhaging £34 million a day when he took over in January 2020. Some radical decisions were made.

The Megane and Scenic were reinvented as BEVs. The 5, then a back-room concept, was given the green light and fast-tracked for production, followed by the 4. Drawing on its extensive Zoe experience – this was Europe's best-selling EV in 2015 and 2016, remember – Renault engineered dedicated combustion and BEV platforms rather than using compromised multi-energy architecture. It took full advantage of its supply chains to create a highly efficient automotive ecosystem with the Douai plant at its centre. And rather than pour endless millions into developing exorbitant in-house tech, it struck partnerships with the likes of Google.

Challenging decisions with huge implications, but Renault has seemingly pulled off the impossible. From staring oblivion in the face, it's now flourishing with an intelligent mix of cool retro models and a fresh range of accomplished and affordable cars, spearheaded by the Scenic.



Douai will build eight different models at once

Looks a bit different, in fact is very different

Toby Cornelius

Goodbye

MAZDA MX-30 MONTH 6

Niche within a niche

The rotary range-extender Mazda is very good in some extremely specific ways. Chances of it suiting you? Slender. By **Mark Walton**

The story so far

As we say goodbye to the Mazda, we've worked out what it's really good at. Sadly it's not what we need

+ The Mazda MX-30 would be perfect if you're looking for a Mazda MX-30

- Its appeal is narrower than most cars

Logbook

Price £33,495 (£35,295 as tested) **Performance** 17.8kWh battery, electric motor plus 830cc rotary range extender, 168bhp, 9.1sec 0-62mph, 87mph **Efficiency** 37.2mpg (WLTP), 31.2mpg (tested), 21g/km CO2 **Range** 53 miles electric (WLTP)/400 miles with range extender (claimed) **Energy cost** 19.7p per mile **Miles this month** 325 **Total miles** 7674

The deeper you get into any DIY project, the more you realise there are specialist tools for everything. Recently I discovered Volvo produces a factory-spec 'bone tool' for removing interior trim. A while back, a farmer lent me his 'monkey strainer' for tightening barbed-wire fence. And I really want a banana-shaped pair of 'disconnect pliers' with a weird set of teeth, designed to remove those push-tab electrical plugs you find in cars. So useful, if your car has push-tab electrical plugs that need disconnecting.

The MX-30 R-EV is also a specialist tool, which means if you're looking for a particular set of skills, you'd be pleased to own one. So if (a) you do a daily commute and (b) you live under 20 miles from work and (c) you have a home charger and (d) you do the odd longer journey and (e) you travel alone but occasionally take passengers and (f) you want a car with more character than a German SUV and (g) you want something bigger than a city car and (h) you want to feel environmentally friendly and (i) you have a budget of £35k – then this is the car for you.

Why not a full battery car? Because the R-EV means no range anxiety when you drive to John o' Groats. Why not a conventional hybrid? Because most hybrids have a tiny electric range, whereas this can do 40-odd miles on electric only. Why not a tiny petrol hatchback? Because the Mazda has the presence and driving position of a bigger car, and it's comfortable on a longer journey (noise aside). And if you do a 20-mile daily commute and plug in at home, you could probably go for months without using fuel and average 500mpg over the year (er, that's not an official figure).

So the MX-30 R-EV has appeal – but sadly, these are just not the skills I need. I mostly work from home and then drive longer journeys, which means too often I've found myself on a 200-mile round trip with the little 830cc engine straining to keep the battery alive. (The range extender only charges; it never drives the wheels.) And the noise is like listening to a Hoover for two hours straight.

Other grumbles? The heating system can have a mind of its own; the 8.8-inch colour screen is small by modern standards and navigating through the sub-menus is painful (it's not a touchscreen); and I had to put a litre of oil into the engine towards the end of our time with the car, suggesting Mazda may not have fully cured the rotary engine's appetite.

Still, it's comfortable and quick and if you're looking for a range-extended EV with a rotary engine, suicide doors and some cork interior trim, where else are you going to go?

Count the cost

Cost new £35,295 **Part exchange** £19,888 **Cost per mile** 19.2p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £2.20

Goodbye

MERCEDES-BENZ GLC **MONTH 4**

The 84mpg SUV

Merc's diesel plug-in hybrid signs off with some impressive mpg figures. By **Ben Barry**

The story so far

Merc's mid-size SUV, here in unusual diesel PHEV form

+ Roomy and well equipped, and economical by normal standards...

- ... but official figures seem well out of reach

Logbook

Price £61,110 (£61,825 as tested) **Performance** 31.2kWh battery, 1993cc turbodiesel four-cylinder plus e-motor, 328bhp, 553lb ft **Efficiency** 565.0mpg (official), 84.3mpg plus 3.6 miles per kWh (tested), 11g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 15.7p per mile **Miles this month** 832 **Total miles** 6102

Normally if you'd averaged under 20 per cent of a car's official mpg figures you'd be miffed, but we know those WLTP PHEV numbers are wildly irrelevant to most people's lives and I'm happy with the 84.3mpg our GLC 300de plug-in diesel returned over 4531 miles – 52 per cent of that on electricity.

To recap, the GLC combines a 2.0-litre turbodiesel engine with a single e-motor and 31.2kWh battery. It produces 328bhp and weighs 2310kg. Officially it does... 565mpg.

The GLC is refined more than entertaining. The steering's isolated, the handling failsafe more than connected and the gearshifts really quite gentle. But I found it relaxing in everyday use, with good comfort, infotainment and plenty of space. Performance was surprisingly stout (even with the battery drained) and it was quick enough in purely electric mode – though the delay for the engine to kick in for overtakes or on slip roads was alarming.

At 470 litres, you lose 150 litres of luggage space compared with a non-hybrid GLC, but the boot's still a very healthy size. It's a worthwhile trade for a battery more than twice as large as the previous generation.

Mercedes uniquely offers a plug-in petrol version of the same model, the GLC 300e. The 2.0-litre petrol makes for a predictably smoother transition between engine and electric, and better refinement on longer trips, but Mercedes has clearly put much effort into suppressing the diesel, so it's hardly intrusive. On a 233-mile run in the petrol version, starting fully charged, I managed 46.4mpg, with 38 per cent on electricity. That compares with 46.2mpg but just 20 per cent on electricity during a recent 218-mile round trip to Oxford in the plug-in hybrid diesel GLC, in colder weather and with more urban driving.

The loan was revealing for another reason. The GLC 300de comes with coil springs up front and air springs for the rear. On A-roads and motorways the ride is usually good, but cambered roads and poorer surfaces make it rock about.

The 300e had the optional Refinement pack, with full air suspension and rear-steer. Ride quality was vastly improved, giving the GLC a calmer, more sophisticated feel. The combination of rear-wheel steer and uprated suspension also made the GLC more cohesive in mid- to higher-speed corners – the standard car turns, topples as the rear catches up, then settles. With the Refinement package, the GLC settles immediately.

The package costs £2495 and, considering how dramatically it improves the GLC's ride and handling, I'd definitely spec it if I bought a GLC. Even as standard, though, the GLC 300de makes for a solid all-rounder.

Count the cost

Cost new £61,825 **Part exchange** £46,292 **Cost per mile** 15.6p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £2.71

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ASZ 2102	£175
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B8 ATR	£375
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K23 ATT	£375
H21 AUG	£275
D22 AUG	£175
A24 AUG	£375
H23 AUL	£375
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AVI 4357	£75
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AVZ 2339	£75
H21 AYR	£375
F21 AYS	£275
AYZ 4480	£175
P121 BAB	£275
J28 BAD	£375
A24 BAG	£275
Y90 BAL	£375
N121 BAM	£275
F22 BAN	£175
B23 BAN	£375
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K555 BAR	£375
P25 BAX	£275
K321 BAX	£275
E22 BAY	£375
K27 BAY	£275
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P321 BRO	£275
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N26 BRU	£275
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BSZ 434	£275
BSZ 1047	£175
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A24 BUD	£275
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N24 CAF	£375
P26 CAF	£375
B11 CAG	£375
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F26 CAJ	£375
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M121 COM	£375
K27 COO	£175
N99 COO	£275
G16 COP	£275
A22 COP	£375
PA05 COS	£175
P21 COT	£375
K27 COT	£275
T321 COT	£175
A24 COV	£375
M123 COY	£275
A23 CPB	£375
E25 CPH	£375
K23 CRA	£375
C23 CRD	£275
R17 CRH	£375
G21 CRO	£375
W8 CSD	£375
A24 CTR	£375
N26 CUT	£375
CYZ 4547	£75
CYZ 4549	£75
P21 DAF	£275
K27 DAG	£275
P66 DAG	£375
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P156 DAY	£175
B25 DBS	£275
E24 DCM	£275
M18 DCS	£275
G16 DDD	£375
P24 DDS	£275
L123 DEC	£375
E15 DEK	£375
P21 DEK	£375
L25 DEK	£275
M26 DEK	£375
R999 DER	£375
M600 DES	£375
R24 DEW	£375
N31 DEW	£275
A23 DEX	£375
P25 DEX	£375
R27 DEX	£375
A23 DEY	£375
DEZ 903	£375
R9 DFB	£375
DGZ 535	£275
DGZ 2444	£175
DHZ 646	£375
DHZ 771	£275
W16 DJA	£375
G24 DJD	£375
F23 DJF	£375
A24 DJG	£375
D23 DJJ	£375
C25 DJK	£375
E25 DJK	£275
A24 DJN	£275
OX53 DJS	£175
P121 DJS	£375
N121 DJT	£175
K121 DJW	£375
W28 DLB	£375
P121 DMB	£275
K26 DMG	£375
P40 DMH	£375
H22 DNG	£375
C21 DNY	£275
A22 DOD	£375
G24 DOD	£275
A24 DOL	£375
P29 DOR	£375
F26 DPB	£275
C26 DPH	£375
E21 DPS	£175
K28 DRH	£375
G23 DRM	£275
E21 DRU	£375
P24 DRU	£275
A24 DSH	£375
A24 DSR	£375
DSZ 114	£275
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DSZ 2106	£75
DSZ 2107	£75
W26 DUF	£375
K121 DUN	£375
D21 DYS	£375
A23 EAH	£375
H24 EAL	£275
D26 EAL	£375
P29 EAM	£175
A23 EAR	£175
D23 EAR	£375
H24 EAR	£275
B23 EAT	£275
H23 EAT	£375
EAZ 661	£275
H21 EBS	£375
D23 EBY	£275
A23 ECS	£375
A23 EDG	£375
G21 EDS	£375
P21 EDW	£375
K27 EDW	£275
D23 EED	£375
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B26 ELT	£375
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P23 EMB	£375
G21 EML	£375
H22 END	£375
W400 END	£275
H22 ENS	£375
A23 ENS	£375
B24 ENY	£375
K121 EON	£375
H14 ERL	£275
A23 ERN	£375
R23 ERN	£375
G21 ERR	£275
C22 ERS	£375
L23 ERS	£275
G24 ERY	£375
J200 ERY	£275
P8 ESM	£375
H21 ESS	£375
B24 ESS	£275
H22 ETY	£375
K28 EVN	£375
A24 EYE	£275
P24 FAB	£375
K121 FAB	£275
P21 FAT	£275
S24 FAT	£375
K27 FAT	£275
N28 FAT	£175
V15 FEB	£275
D22 FEB	£375
A23 FEB	£375
A24 FEE	£275
J24 FEE	£375
K27 FEN	£375
K29 FER	£375
E24 FFY	£375
FHZ 878	£375
R111 FJB	£175
FJZ 343	£175
A24 FOG	£375
F24 FOR	£375
P24 FOS	£275
R25 FOS	£375
P800 FOS	£175
J70 FOW	£275
A22 FRE	£375
J31 FRS	£375
H16 FRY	£375
K24 FRY	£275
FSZ 1501	£75
FSZ 1502	£75
F24 FUL	£275
M100 FUL	£275
Y111 GAN	£375
A24 GAT	£275
T26 GBR	£175
GBZ 566	£275
J10 GEF	£375
K25 GEF	£275
L29 GEF	£275
L21 GEL	£275
N27 GEN	£275
W88 GEN	£375
S999 GEN	£175
X200 GEO	£375
L28 GER	£375
A24 GES	£275
B24 GET	£375
L15 GGB	£175
J24 GJB	£375
K24 GJB	£275
P800 GJB	£175
F24 GJH	£275
T333 GJH	£175
G26 GLL	£375
B14 GOS	£275
E23 GRM	£375
GSZ 3031	£175
GSZ 3526	£75
X053 GXS	£75
P23 HAD	£175
R29 HAW	£375
T90 HAW	£275
N121 HEN	£375
K23 HEP	£375
PW51 HER	£75
N33 HES	£375
K23 HEW	£375
HIG 5556	£275
T88 HOB	£375
S900 HOB	£275
S963 HOB	£175
P24 HOD	£375
N27 HOD	£375
Y121 HOT	£275
N27 HOW	£375
C21 HOY	£375
HSZ 4024	£75
HSZ 4042	£75
HSZ 7054	£49
N28 HUL	£275
N29 HUN	£275
IAZ 344	£375
IKZ 446	£375
IXZ 3253	£75
JBZ 778	£275
A24 JCG	£175
A23 JCR	£275
T27 JEB	£275
P28 JEC	£275
E23 JEE	£275
R24 JEL	£275
P28 JEL	£175
R29 JEP	£275
M24 JER	£275
JEZ 7278	£375
JEZ 7672	£275
JFZ 223	£275
G26 JGB	£275
JGZ 5576	£175
JIL 7702	£375
B76 JJC	£275
Y28 JJD	£275
W600 JJM	£275
A24 JJP	£275
M60 JJW	£275
A14 JKH	£275
K27 JLH	£275
L121 JME	£275
K123 JMH	£275
K55 JMT	£275
P21 JOB	£275
K321 JOS	£275
K321 JPB	£275
G23 JPC	£275
P121 JPC	£175
W11 JPK	£175
Y900 JPR	£175
N555 JPS	£275
JRZ 166	£375
JRZ 2329	£75
H22 JSC	£275
F24 JSW	£275
N29 JTB	£175
N21 JUN	£275
P28 KAB	£275
E24 KAH	£275
P21 KAN	£175
P28 KEE	£275
N321 KER	£275
KIG 151	£375
E17 KJP	£275
KRZ 7567	£75
P23 LAD	£275
B22 LAG	£275
A24 LAG	£175
B23 LAK	£175
A22 LAR	£275
B23 LAR	£275
F22 LAX	£175
H21 LDS	£275
T28 LEC	£275
L700 LEG	£275
P24 LER	£275
N25 LER	£175
K23 LET	£275
LGZ 3565	£75
LGZ 6323	£75
LIG 9721	£75
H21 LLB	£275
H21 LLD	£275
K27 LLE	£275
H21 LLG	£175
J21 LLG	£275
H21 LLP	£175
E22 LMW	£275
P44 LON	£275
K28 LOO	£275
K24 LOV	£175
N24 LOV	£275
LUI 845	£375
D21 LYY	£275
F21 LYY	£175
G21 LYY	£275
H21 LYY	£275
A23 LYY	£275
K24 MAF	£275
R123 MAW	£275
P200 MCA	£175
A24 MCJ	£99
N24 MCP	£175
D23 MCR	£275
C26 MCS	£275
K321 MCS	£175
G41 MCT	£175
C24 MDB	£275
J80 MDW	£275
P26 MED	£175
A24 MEM	£175
K321 MET	£275
R321 MET	£175
A24 MGB	£275
E18 MGM	£275
MGZ 1283	£175
MGZ 4896	£95
P13 MHW	£75
E26 MJA	£175
G26 MJA	£275
K121 MJK	£275
K27 MJL	£275
N121 MJP	£275
D25 MLC	£275
K121 MLS	£175
L28 MMB	£275
P28 MMS	£275
P77 MOE	£175
K121 MOE	£175
H9 MOW	£275
A24 MOW	£175
D24 MPW	£175
A24 MPY	£275
R111 MRH	£275
A24 MRL	£275
E22 MRM	£275
H23 MRP	£275
K321 MRP	£175
E24 MRY	£275
MRZ 2638	£175
K26 MSH	£275
E24 MSS	£275
K27 MSW	£275
Y25 MTB	£175
Y24 MTH	£275
MUI 881	£375
MXZ 3310	£75
A21 MYM	£275
Y14 NAG	£175
L29 NAG	£275
P24 NAP	£275
R29 NAP	£175
T28 NAR	£275
N29 NAR	£175
A23 NDW	£275
P23 NED	£175
R28 NED	£275
L28 NGE	£175
Y121 NGE	£99
A23 NGL	£275
A23 NGY	£175
NGZ 1012	£75
NGZ 1022	£75
K321 NJH	£275
G23 NJP	£275
NJZ 227	£175
GU54 NNE	£175
P31 NNN	£175
A23 NNS	£275
P31 NOR	£275
NRZ 474	£275
A24 NSL	£275
A26 NTS	£275
A21 NYS	£275
C23 OAT	£275
B22 OBB	£275
H21 OBY	£275
OBZ 552	£275
A21 OCH	£175
P23 OCT	£175
D25 ODD	£275
J23 OEE	£275
OGZ 5449	£175
OJZ 878	£275
P28 OLD	£275
T31 OLD	£99
N31 ONG	£275
C21 OPP	£275
H22 OSK	£175
C21 OTS	£175
H21 OTS	£275
H23 OWL	£275
K28 OWL	£275
OXZ 1031	£175
E21 OYD	£275
K31 OYD	£99
S200 PAD	£275
K29 PAN	£275
K31 PAP	£275
K121 PAS	£275
C8 PBW	£275
A4 PCD	£275
K23 PEG	£275
R121 PEG	£75
S300 PES	£175
K23 PET	£275
N7 PEX	£275
PGZ 1264	£75
PGZ 1265	£75
L23 PJC	£275
Y26 PJW	£275
A15 PLC	£275
PLZ 262	£275
N23 PMB	£275
V121 PMC	£275
D20 PMS	£175
G22 POO	£275
K31 PPP	£175
PRZ 1016	£95
PRZ 2635	£75
K27 PUD	£275
J50 PUL	£275
PXI 966	£275
PXZ 1834	£75
PXZ 1835	£75
N222 RAC	£275
L500 RAC	£175
N21 RAG	£275
L29 RAG	£275
N26 RAK	£275
A23 RAL	£275
N27 RAL	£175
P26 RAR	£275
R121 RAT	£275
N70 RAV	£275
P31 RCS	£275
C24 RDD	£275
G24 RDD	£175
A24 RDH	£275
A24 RDW	£275
A22 RDY	£275
P29 REA	£275
N49 REB	£275
P121 REB	£175
P31 REE	£275
Y20 REG	£275
M666 REL	£275
M321 REM	£275
N24 REV	£275
G12 REX	£275
A23 REX	£275
P700 REX	£175
P21 RFC	£275
C7 RFH	£275
RGZ 1018	£175
RGZ 2806	£75
W61 RJH	£275
E21 RJR	£275
E24 RLL	£275
A24 RLN	£275
P31 RLS	£275
K121 RMS	£275
A23 RMW	£275
A15 ROJ	£175
P14 ROL	£275
A24 ROL	£275
L600 ROW	£275
RRZ 1089	£75
RRZ 1206	£175
RRZ 1207	£175
K26 RSB	£275
D21 RUL	£275
K26 RUM	£275
K23 RYE	£175
J31 RYE	£275
K27 SAC	£275
P23 SAD	£275
A23 SAK	£275
N21 SAT	£275
R121 SAW	£275
J18 SAY	£175
E21 SAY	£275
SBZ 337	£275
A24 SCU	£275
K21 SED	£175
L21 SEE	£275
K25 SEP	£175
T944 SET	£75
SEZ 776	£375
SGZ 122	£275
SGZ 2357	£75
SGZ 2358	£175
SGZ 2359	£175
K24 SHO	£275
P27 SHO	£175
K123 SHY	£275
SHZ 3591	£275
SIG 1032	£175
SJI 933	£375
K26 SKA	£275
L121 SLS	£175
K14 SMD	£275
H23 SMD	£175
B24 SMP	£275
K26 SOL	£275
T29 SOO	£175
R121 SOO	£175
L321 SPY	£275
A25 SRW	£275
SRZ 1265	£75
SRZ 1361	£175
B23 SSB	£275
K31 SSO	£275
G22 SSY	£275
N60 SUL	£175
P888 SUL	£175
A26 SUN	£275
K600 SUS	£175
SXZ 2053	£75
SXZ 2124	£175
K121 TAB	£175
P21 TAC	£175
P54 TAD	£75
N25 TAF	£175
P24 TAJ	£275
H24 TAL	£275
R27 TAL	£275
N27 TAP	£275
L400 TAP	£175
P121 TAS	£175
K21 TAT	£275
N333 TCH	£275
TGZ 1581	£175
K28 THE	£275
THZ 1829	£75
TIG 1697	£175
K121 TJB	£275
TJZ 252	£275
H21 TNY	£275
A26 TNY	£175
N653 TOD	£175
N21 TOP	£275
P24 TOP	£175
AS05 TOR	£275
P121 TOR	£175
L111 TPH	£75
P111 TRH	£75
TRZ 1348	£175
TRZ 1349	£175
TRZ 1352	£75
K28 TTH	£275
N121 TTS	£275
P28 TTT	£275
A19 TTY	£275
C23 UBB	£275
D23 UDS	£275
UIG 1216	£75
F21 UNA	£275
URZ 2234	£75
URZ 3274	£49
T29 USA	£175
E24 VEE	£275
P21 VEN	£275
N900 VET	£175
VIG 1027	£75
K31 VOS	£175
VRZ 3282	£75
VRZ 3283	£75
VRZ 3284	£75
N27 WAG	£175
P321 WAG	£175
G007 WAN	£275
R24 WAY	£275
K121 WAY	£175
F21 WBA	£275
A23 WBA	£275
N21 WED	£275
P24 WED	£175
R121 WED	£75
S900 WED	£175
R31 WEL	£275
L010 WES	£275
N121 WES	£275
WEZ 7800	£275
WHZ 1019	£275
WIG 161	£375
WIG 2585	£175
WIG 2586	£75
R31 WYN	£275
XIG 3678	£49
YHZ 1490	£49
YHZ 1491	£75
YUI 1425	£75
YUI 1479	£49
K24 YYE	£275
TW02 ZAC	£275

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HOW DOES GBU WORK?
Our road testers rank the best cars currently available in 12 categories, and highlight the ones to buy

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: The Top 5s

TOP 5 HOT HATCHES

Latest version pipped the Civic in last month's test

1

TOYOTA GR YARIS

THE GOOD: A modern-day rally homologation special that's thrilling to drive

THE BAD: Road noise like a death-metal gig; joke rear seats

THE UGLY: Long waiting list, even with some versions now over £60k, although it starts at £46,045

THE ONE TO BUY: Now has optional auto but go for the manual

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

THE GOOD: Feel, feedback, focus: a phenomenal car

THE BAD: Now £51,905 for a front-drive hatchback with barely any more power than before

THE UGLY: Honda says it's the last of its kind; good job it's one of the best

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one Type R; £459 a month is worth it

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

VW GOLF R

THE GOOD: Superb Mk8.5 update makes this a seriously good and usefully quick all-rounder

THE BAD: Pity the Mk8 wasn't that already

THE UGLY: Still not quite there with the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: Estate is about £1.5k more than the hatch and more practical but not so sharp

GIANT TEST WINNER

4

AUDI RS3

THE GOOD: Want a five-cylinder hot hatch? Your option is RS3, with five or four doors

THE BAD: Now £60k; small boot for both

THE UGLY: RS is still better, but S3 does a lot for less money and is impressive in its own right

THE ONE TO BUY: £60,105 for the hatch; an extra grand for the saloon

5

VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

THE GOOD: Rare mix of supreme comfort, hatchback versatility and cornering bite

THE BAD: The stats don't really shine in a 2025 context

THE UGLY: Mk8.5 a definite improvement, but interface still offers plenty to gripe about

THE ONE TO BUY: £42,155 for a very good Golf is pretty decent value

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TOP 5 SPORTS CARS

Our inside sources tell us EV plans have been parked

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

PORSCHE 911

THE GOOD: Exquisite blend of power, accuracy, excitement, style and usability, and new GTS integrates hybrid beautifully

THE BAD: You have to look down to #3 in this category to see the affordable performance Porsche; the most basic 911 is now priced in six figures in the UK, at £103,700

THE UGLY: It keeps getting bigger and heavier

THE ONE TO BUY: That basic Carrera is ace, and it's hard to imagine you'll regret it for a minute. But if you want more power and more trickery then Porsche has plenty of ways to take more of your money

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

ARIEL ATOM

THE GOOD:
A beautiful object as well as a thrilling drive; think of it as a modernised Lotus Seven crossed with a high-end sportsbike

THE BAD: You'll need bike-style wet-weather gear if it's raining. And at least £40k – this is an expensive toy, if a captivating one

THE UGLY: The 4R is even more bonkers

THE ONE TO BUY:
Do you really need the 350bhp optional power upgrade?

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN/BOXSTER

THE GOOD:
Sublime handling; surprising practicality

THE BAD: Less characterful than an Alpine; a boringly obvious choice (but not one bit boring to drive)

THE UGLY: Flat-four versions sound like a VW Beetle in a duet with Eeyore

THE ONE TO BUY:
GT4 RS the most thrilling, Spyder is ace, but flat-six GTS 4.0 is a cut-price GT4 at £75,300

4

LOTUS EMIRA

THE GOOD:
The first new combustion Lotus in years is fantastically well resolved. Usable, desirable and thrilling

THE BAD: Harder work to live with than a Cayman

THE UGLY: The last petrol Lotus, at least for now – just as the firm gets the bucks to build on its brilliance

THE ONE TO BUY:
Recently revised line-up now consists of Turbo SE (AMG four-cylinder) and Toyota-engined V6

5

ALPINE A110

THE GOOD:
The perfectly formed antidote to a world of excess; a modern classic in every sense of the term

THE BAD: Two boots, neither big, and not much oddment storage inside

THE UGLY: R is 34kg lighter – some effort – but also more than £90k. Too much

THE ONE TO BUY:
A110 S adds handling poise for £68,170 but £55,160 base A110 is all you need; enjoy it before it goes electric

TOP 5 GRAND TOURERS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

FERRARI ROMA

THE GOOD: Style, speed and sensuous lines; classic ideas adapted for 2025

THE BAD: If only the roads had classic emptiness

THE UGLY: Baffling steering-wheel touchpads; strangled exhaust note

THE ONE TO BUY: The cabrio. Arguably even more beautiful to look at from outside

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

THE GOOD: Luxury, power, agility and a great-looking body

THE BAD: Nope, it's really sorted

THE UGLY: Just because it's always been heavy and thirsty won't stop us complaining that it's heavy and thirsty

THE ONE TO BUY: Plug-in hybrid range-topper is the most powerful Bentley ever, and so much more besides

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

PORSCHE 911 TURBO

THE GOOD: Hypercar-bothering pace, any road, any weather

THE BAD: Only fun when you're really going for it

THE UGLY: Turbo has never been good for depreciation; even less so recently

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry car plenty fast enough but Turbo S outsells it; hybrid update is expected later this year

PORSCHE TAYCAN CROSS TURISMO

THE GOOD: Raised ride height absolutely monsters lumpy UK roads

THE BAD: Not actually that practical

THE UGLY: Audi's e-Tron GT gets the nicer cockpit

THE ONE TO BUY: Revised version has arrived, along with revised prices: 4S Cross Turismo is now £99,200, and range hits £165k

ASTON MARTIN DB12

THE GOOD: Effortlessly beautiful DB11 replacement now has the traction to make the most of the rampant turbo V8's stomp. Excellent interior

THE BAD: Choosing between this and the Vanquish

THE UGLY: Aston simply doesn't do ugly

THE ONE TO BUY: Coupe is £185k; Volante the stunner

TOP 5 COUPES AND CABRIOS

BMW M2

THE GOOD: The longitudinal-engined two-door BMW coupe lives

THE BAD: Bigger and heavier than we'd like but outrageous fun

THE UGLY: You need £67k to get involved; steering can feel a shade rubbery

THE ONE TO BUY: Manual or auto transmission options – get the knob. We'd go M carbon seats, too

MASERATI MC20

THE GOOD: A no-excuses excellent Maserati. Handling and ride to match the looks; a GT as well as a sports car

THE BAD: Throttle could be sharper in normal mode

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you did mean to buy the Maser and not the 296

THE ONE TO BUY: The droptop Cielo. All the coupe's go with added style

ASTON MARTIN VANTAGE ROADSTER

THE GOOD: Glorious V8 engine, wonderful body, superb handling

THE BAD: Boot shrinks compared to the coupe

THE UGLY: Cabin is better than before, but for the money you'd want Bentley standard

THE ONE TO BUY: £175,000 for the Roadster is about £10k more than the hardtop

MERCEDES-AMG SL

THE GOOD: Latest SL was developed by AMG but it's still a cruiser, and all the better for it

THE BAD: Engines are still better than the ride and handling

THE UGLY: Cabin designed by touchpad scattergun

THE ONE TO BUY: The £153k, 469bhp SL55; also look at the coupe cousin, the AMG GT

MAZDA MX-5

THE GOOD: Closest thing to a modern-day Lotus Elan; genius folds-flat-in-seconds roof

THE BAD: Lashings of bodyroll; the 1.5 can't climb hills

THE UGLY: If you're over 6ft tall you might not fit, especially in the metal-roofed RF

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 starts at £28k, 2.0 in Homura spec brings LSD for £35,515

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUPERCARS

FERRARI 296 GTB

THE GOOD: Timeless styling and a driving experience as good as any of Maranello's finest

THE BAD: You need reflexes like a fighter pilot to drive it as fast as it can go

THE UGLY: Touch-sensitive steering-wheel pads make the interface borderline unusable

THE ONE TO BUY: Fiorano pack is £25k+ overkill. GTS adds sunshine

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

THE GOOD: Spine-tingling sound; 9000rpm redline; total immersion

THE BAD: Nothing to see here

THE UGLY: Getting on the waiting list is like winning both *The X Factor* and *The Apprentice*

THE ONE TO BUY: RS is somehow more focused than the GT3 but more road-compliant at the same time. How do they do it?

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

THE GOOD: The monstrous, naturally-aspirated V12 lives on – now e-boosted and wrapped in such a hard-to-crash package insurance should be a tenner. Vastly improved cabin, too

THE BAD: Price has skyrocketed

THE UGLY: EV-only range is six miles

THE ONE TO BUY: There is only one for now

MCLAREN 750S

THE GOOD: Lighter, more powerful, better: evolution of 720S is another corker from Woking

THE BAD: 30 per cent new but you'd struggle to tell

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you actually bought the new car

THE ONE TO BUY: Stick to the comfort-spec seats and avoid the harnesses on the top 'super carbon' ones

CHEVROLET CORVETTE Z06

THE GOOD: A beautifully balanced performance package that can stand tall among the supercar aristocracy

THE BAD: Interior quality and kit not quite there

THE UGLY: Will future electrification kill the thrill?

THE ONE TO BUY: Add the Z07 pack for upgraded aero, suspension, brakes and wheels; expect to pay £140k

TOP 5 PLUG-IN HYBRIDS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

BMW X5 50E

THE GOOD: Massive 67-mile official e-range; horizon-eating performance

THE BAD: Hybrid hardware cuts into boot space to the tune of 150 litres; no seven-seat option

THE UGLY: Not much now that the facelifted 50e model with more e-range and power is here

THE ONE TO BUY: This one, for £82k; it will serve you well

FORD KUGA

THE GOOD: Facelift has brought better efficiency, and it still drives very well

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't great, although fuel consumption's good

THE UGLY: Interior a little dowdy next to the Explorer

THE ONE TO BUY: PHEV in ST-Line X trim can be had for £42,565, and there's currently a zero per cent finance offer

PORSCHE CAYENNE

THE GOOD: Handling; driver focus; choice of body styles; 0-62mph in 5.0sec

THE BAD: Bigger battery for facelift model but still can't match the X5

THE UGLY: The front passenger touchscreen: £1000 and not needed

THE ONE TO BUY: If you value the U in SUV, avoid the coupe – even if it is a great steer

VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN

THE GOOD: Mk3 is bigger than ever but still a neat all-round package. Choice of 201 and 268bhp PHEVs, both with 62-mile e-range

THE BAD: Room for improvement with the infotainment

THE UGLY: People are buying Tiguans instead of Golfs, in huge numbers

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for either of the eHybrids in good-value Match trim

BMW 330E

THE GOOD: Goes sub-six to 62mph and up to 41 electric miles on a charge

THE BAD: Engine is slightly coarse; plain 330i is less heavy, more fun

THE UGLY: Hybrid kit eats into boot space so regular 3s are roomier

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of saloon or estate. Handsome, vaguely affordable 330e Sport Touring is £48,895

TOP 5 ELECTRIC CARS

Just when you thought the 5 would be No1 for ever...

1

NEW ENTRY

RENAULT 4

THE GOOD: All the joyfulness and fun of the 5, but now with added practicality… just like the old days

THE BAD: Some minor annoyance with the fiddly drive selector

THE UGLY: Where the 5 is a sensationally adept modern recreation of the look and feel of the original, the new 4 is a bit generic to look at

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £26,995, which is very hard to argue with. Mechanically just the one version for now, but a dizzying amount of choice, trim and options

2

GIANT TEST WINNER

RENAULT 5 E-TECH

THE GOOD: The way it looks, the way it drives, the keen pricing – but it's also refreshingly practical, with five doors, a usable rear bench, and good efficiency

THE BAD: Fiddly gear selector stalk; no frunk

THE UGLY: What ugly? Look at it

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry point is £22,995 but we'd splash a few more grand on mid-spec Techno and the bigger battery

3

GIANT TEST WINNER

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

THE GOOD: Electric and exciting – synthetic drive modes and gearchange are game changers

THE BAD: Breadth of configurability takes getting used to. Ignore that it's software-driven – it feels real

THE UGLY: Interior quality below par for a £65k car

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one model; paint and a sunroof the only options – all the drive modes are included

4

PORSCHE TAYCAN

THE GOOD: Totally overhauled but still fast, responsive and fluid; now more efficient

THE BAD: Info screen in front of the passenger is faintly ridiculous

THE UGLY: Prices are all up, and be aware of poor demand for used Taycans

THE ONE TO BUY: Priced from £88,200 for the rear-drive basic Taycan; you can pay a lot more and get a bit more performance

5

KIA EV3

THE GOOD: Roomy and clever interior; great value for such long range; funky looks – it's a shrunken EV9 or EV6

THE BAD: Air trim feels cheap inside, but only when compared to bigger Kia EVs

THE UGLY: That weird climate-control screen

THE ONE TO BUY: The 270-mile-range car is brilliant value but most will want the longer-range option. GT-Line is our pick for value-to-comfort goodness

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUVS/CROSSOVERS

Want it more yellow or more green? Get the new Trophy edition

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

THE GOOD: Reboot brings untold dynamic improvements wherever you drive

THE BAD: Second-row access is a pain in the 90; expensive; 130 in particular is very big, so parking can be tricky

THE UGLY: Very nice inside, so you're wary of getting it muddy

THE ONE TO BUY: Range spans 90, 110 and 130 bodies, with significantly different dimensions but remarkably similar character and the genuine off-road ability that Land Rover always delivers so convincingly. Heart says Octa or petrol V8 90, head/wallet say diesel-six D250 110

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

PORSCHE MACAN

THE GOOD: The new one is electric – and as impressive as the outgoing combustion version

THE BAD: As family transport it has flaws, especially boot space

THE UGLY: Don't want EV? You'll need to be quick (or wait for the rumoured return of engines)

THE ONE TO BUY: EV starts at £68,500 and rises to £96,900 for the Turbo; £71,200 4 offers all you could sensibly want

3

ASTON MARTIN DBX 707

THE GOOD: Now with a much improved interior, the DBX keeps the glorious noise, masterful balance, rear-axle bias and surprising practicality

THE BAD: High fuel consumption and emissions from the twin-turbo V8

THE UGLY: There's no longer a non-707 version, so you need to pay top dollar

THE ONE TO BUY: The 707 will cost you around £210k

4

MERCEDES G-CLASS

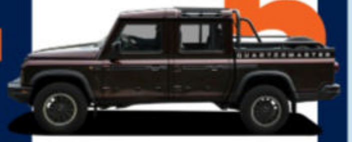
THE GOOD: Rejigged range spans diesel, petrol, AMG and EV, and they're all good: agile off-road, smooth and comfy on-road

THE BAD: It's all a bit fancy; how do you feel about muddy wellies?

THE UGLY: Merc's premium mission means it's a posh version or nothing

THE ONE TO BUY: Electric is astonishingly good, but expensive at £154,870 (although the AMG's more)

5



INEOS QUARTERMASTER

THE GOOD: Pick-up version of the Grenadier has a long wheelbase that if anything improves the handling

THE BAD: Not very roomy for passengers

THE UGLY: Isuzus are much cheaper, if far less cool

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £66k, but a Trialmaster edition at £74k brings together a practical and good-looking set of extras

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TOP 5 LUXURY CARS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

RANGE ROVER

THE GOOD: Masterful and hugely desirable reinvention of an icon. An EV version is almost here

THE BAD: Reliability remains a worry. EV likely to be extremely heavy

THE UGLY: The D350 mild-hybrid straight-six diesel is sublime. Can you live with the guilt?

THE ONE TO BUY: The above (from £108,555), though the V8 is fun

ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

THE GOOD: Money-no-object pinnacle of serenity and craftsmanship

THE BAD: Is this really you? And is this really appropriate in 2025?

THE UGLY: It's all a bit oligarchy

THE ONE TO BUY: It's 'standard' or long-wheelbase, from £380k. All cars are built to order so many owners pay much more

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

THE GOOD: Now a hybrid V8, the Spur has great performance and poise plus decent e-range

THE BAD: Other VW Group cars get even smarter chassis tech

THE UGLY: Lots of emphasis on expensive options, so brace your credit card

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the Speed, from £226,500

MERCEDES S-CLASS

THE GOOD: Tech-fest with timeless waftability. Few cars are more calming

THE BAD: Surprisingly unrefined petrol six; doesn't ride as well as it should

THE UGLY: Trying not to crash while using the Hyperscreen

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid 580e works best: £119,370 in entry AMG Line Premium trim

ROLLS-ROYCE SPECTRE

THE GOOD: A joy to drive, and exquisitely built

THE BAD: Efficiency not great

THE UGLY: Fabulous detailing and engineering will benefit so few

THE ONE TO BUY: New Black Badge version keeps what's good about the regular Spectre but adds an extra level of dynamism. Also, of course, a bit more expense

TOP 5 FAMILY CARS

BIG SELLER
1

BMW 3-SERIES

THE GOOD: On-the-deck driving position; dreamy handling balance; slick interior; 50 years on, a brilliant car to drive and live with

THE BAD: Knowing you've made the obvious choice

THE UGLY: You'll need an M340i or M340d for six cylinders

THE ONE TO BUY: 330e if you want a hybrid; 320i if you're on a budget

GIANT TEST WINNER
2

BMW 5-SERIES

THE GOOD: Much has changed; still great. Handling defines the class

THE BAD: It's now a very hefty car

THE UGLY: Is nowhere safe? Even the tradition-embracing 5-series gets a full EV option in the form of the i5

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £52,175 for the 520i but can easily exceed £80k (and the M5's well into six figures)

DACIA JOGGER

THE GOOD: Seven seats; massive boot with the rear row removed; prices start at £18,970

THE BAD: Sandero base means it's a bit narrow; spartan

THE UGLY: Low Euro NCAP score, although it's pretty safe in a crash

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid usefully punchier than petrol, but much clunkier. PCP a steal at £187 a month

VOLKSWAGEN ID. 7

THE GOOD: The most coherent ID to date now in a choice of hatch and estate. Not posh, but highly agreeable

THE BAD: Frumpy styling and that still sub-par interface

THE UGLY: So few electric estates to choose from

THE ONE TO BUY: Pro Match with 77kWh battery does the job just fine, priced from £51,005 for the hatch

AUDI A6 E-TRON

THE GOOD: Electric saloon and estate is refined, quick and pretty sharp, with a typically smart cabin, decent range and quick charging

THE BAD: Rear passenger room isn't great

THE UGLY: Audi's constant model name changes are just confusing

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the £70,715 rear-wheel-drive A6 e-Tron Performance

TOP 5 FAMILY HATCHES

BMW 1-SERIES

THE GOOD: Premium and practical, and a lot more normal than the original 1-series

THE BAD: Actually a bit too normal for some tastes

THE UGLY: Facelift has dialled down the ugly, thankfully

THE ONE TO BUY: £31,875 mild-hybrid front-drive 120 or £43,740 all-wheel-drive 296bhp M135; both good, but on the big and heavy side

PEUGEOT 208

THE GOOD: Style; big-car character; knockout interior; EV version available

THE BAD: So-so handling; a squash for adult rear-seat passengers

THE UGLY: Dumping the wheel in your lap like a TV dinner to see the dials clearly

THE ONE TO BUY: From £24,155, but £26,305 GT is worth saving up for. Bright colour is best

GIANT
TEST
WIN
3

MINI COUNTRYMAN

THE GOOD: Wonderful interior and all-round feelgood factor from the big five-door

THE BAD: You need to be in the mood for the built-in zaniness

THE UGLY: Options can send the price into the stratosphere

THE ONE TO BUY: Your basic Countryman C Classic is just fine at a sniff over £29,100

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

THE GOOD: Brain-out default choice still a solid all-rounder; ride, visibility, roominess

THE BAD: Seat Leon a very similar package for a lower price

THE UGLY: Revised Mk8.5 version just a bit better, especially the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 TSI 150 Match at £29,325; roomy estate is also great value

FIAT GRANDE PANDA

THE GOOD: Remarkably roomy, keenly priced, charming and useful

THE BAD: Not the sharpest or quickest

THE UGLY: Everything looks a little plain next to a Renault 5

THE ONE TO BUY: £21k entry or £24k for the better-kitted posh version; EV has now been joined by hybrid

TOP 5 SPORTS SALOONS

GIANT
TEST
WINNER
1

BMW M3

THE GOOD: Mighty straight-six; front axle's never-give-up attitude; dreamy chassis balance

THE BAD: No manual; nearly 911 money now

THE UGLY: M3 Touring £89,435; saloon is £87,205– both quite steep

THE ONE TO BUY: The CS, if you were lucky enough to bag one of the 100 brought here. Used Touring is a good secondhand buy

MERCEDES-AMG S63

THE GOOD: V8 plus e-motor shows AMG can do a great performance hybrid, and in the most unlikely of places: a huge luxury saloon

THE BAD: Boot size suffers, and ride quality isn't perfect

THE UGLY: It's a pity this approach wasn't applied to the latest C63

THE ONE TO BUY: Two versions, both £193,525, one with more black trim

GIANT
TEST
WINNER
3

BMW M5

THE GOOD: Very rapid, ridiculously agile and refreshingly low on emissions; a clever reboot in PHEV form

THE BAD: Lots of modes, and an odd amount of wind noise; more divisive than previous M5s

THE UGLY: Heavy and expensive, so it's not *that* clever

THE ONE TO BUY: £113,405 for the Touring; £2k less for the saloon

ALFA GIULIA QUADRIFOGLIO

THE GOOD: Charisma in spades, fantastic agility and almost as good as an M3 to drive

THE BAD: Emphasis on *almost* as good as an M3 to drive

THE UGLY: Flaky interior quality; infotainment still lags behind the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one, wonderful, model from £86,885

PORSCHE PANAMERA

THE GOOD: New version builds on success of the very fine model it replaces

THE BAD: Barely a saloon – four-up is okay, but forget five

THE UGLY: Estate version is no longer available, even though it was the best looker

THE ONE TO BUY: £89,400 gets you in; Turbo E-Hybrid at £151,500 now tops the range

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Official fuel consumption for the CUPRA Terramar range mpg (litres/100km) combined: 32.1 – 706.2 (8.8 - 0.4). Combined CO_2 emissions: 199-10g/km. Figures include the following models: CUPRA Terramar petrol and e-HYBRID. Plug-in e-HYBRID vehicles require mains electricity for charging. Figures for e-HYBRID vehicles were obtained using a combination of battery power and fuel. Figures shown are for comparability purposes; only compare fuel consumption, CO_2 and electric range figures with other vehicles tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles and vehicle load. Data correct as at March 2025.